A Flower Crown

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A Flower Crown

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Summary

After succesfully escaping with Till and seeing the meteors in the night sky, he didn't want to go back, he could finally be free, *they* could finally be free.
Or atleast he thought so.
He never imagined Till would give up everything to save Mizi instead.
He knew exactly what he was getting into when he coughed up the first petal.

Or

Ivan has hanahaki because of Till and there's no way to stop it.

Chapter 1: Beginning

Chapter Notes

> Hanahaki Disease is a disease in which the victim coughs up flower petals when they suffer from one-sided love. It ends when the beloved returns their feelings, or when the victim dies. It can be cured through surgical removal, but when the infection is removed, the victim's romantic feelings for their love also disappear.
>
> English isn't my first language so please be patient with me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The night was illuminated by the stars, with the only hint of the sun's existence being the faint glow reflected by the moon. Tonight the sky shone brightly with the fire of the meteors flying over the planet, making their way around it as they gave a stunning display to the beings below, reveling in the light as rapid footsteps could be heard.

Running while trying not to make noise isn't the easiest endeavor to partake in, especially not at night, but somehow that doesn't seem to matter to them; even as the place they once lived in moved farther and farther away from view, they were happy. An emotion sought for by so many, yet not reached by all. In a world plagued by suffering and grief, these two boys had long forgotten the feeling of happiness. But seeing these lights, seeing this sky made it all worth it. They were no longer bound by their captors' commands to acquire the finest star in the world, a symbol of power and control. They could make their own decisions, choose their own purpose in life.

But all good things must come to an end.

Ivan thought they would finally be free; he thought he made the right choice.

Without looking, he sensed the firm grip on his hand begin to falter, slipping away in the end. As he turned around, he met the eyes of the boy he once saw standing up to an alien to protect their friend, to be brave. Even though those eyes couldn't meet his gaze, he understood the unspoken message they conveyed.

I'm sorry.

But it didn’t offer him any comfort; it only hurt him more. Watching everything he fought for held in the palm of his hand, only for it to be stolen away by the very person who entrusted it to him. It was cruel. He understood Till's decision to return; he comprehended the depth of his loyalty that prevented him from abandoning her. They purposefully intended for something like this to happen: the unrelenting spirit of someone not being able to leave their loved ones behind, running back for the slight chance, hope that they could escape together.

Realizing that true freedom wouldn't come from running alongside others, Ivan made the difficult choice to remain where he was, for he was no better than Till, having stayed to be with the person they loved. He followed the running figure in front of him back to their cage, a prison built with their futures in mind, but now things were different; he now realized that the green-eyed boy wasn’t his to have, for he already belonged to another. Till's love was so intense that he sacrificed everything to be with her, including freedom and the opportunity for happiness in this harsh world, mirroring his own sacrifices.

Drifting back to the world that just a few seconds ago Ivan thought he would be free from, he couldn't shake this feeling inside of him, this unpleasant, bitter feeling in his stomach. Till didn't notice as the boy's steps began slowing down, ultimately coming to a halt as his hands started shaking, followed by his knees. Struggling to remain upright, he coughed uncontrollably; Ivan's attempt to ease his throat confirmed his worst fears—something was seriously wrong. As the silhouette ahead faded into a blur, he couldn't produce a sound that would gather their attention, already too far away to notice anything had happened to Ivan at all.

He definitely wasn't an ordinary child, and he knew what was happening to him; he had heard some high-rank aliens talking about a friend of theirs that was lost to an illness like this, a disease that would make flowers grow inside of you, stemming from unrequited love. The sickness was so severe that only surgery provided a solution. The alternative required Till to reciprocate his feelings, a notion Ivan found laughable, considering the depth of Till's affections.

And just as his mind started to falter and slip away from him, the coughs now slowing down, he could feel the blood that threatened to spill out from his lips. His body steadily weakened, the battle to retain consciousness becoming more strenuous with each passing moment. He closed his eyes, but the feeling didn't stop, blood trickling down his

mouth until it reached his cheek and pooled on the ground. Refusing to succumb to the agony, he pressed his trembling hands against the ground, his unwavering determination shining through despite his physical weakness. Rising to his feet with effort, he cleared the blood from his face, inhaling deeply. With a trembling hand, he opened his mouth, revealing a solitary petal—the source of his suffering.

The color faded from his face as he set his eyes on the ground and realized all the blood he had lost, a dark shade of crimson clashing against the deep color of the green grass below his feet. Taking a deep breath, he steadied himself, preparing his mind and body for the strain he would be putting on them to get back to Anakt Garden. Lifting his leg and moving forward toward his goal, he counted:

1

Despite the heavy burden on his feet, he had to keep moving forward. Ignoring every ounce of his body that asked him to stop moving, he continued.

2

Getting accustomed to the feeling of walking as he was, Ivan was confident he could persevere. As he neared his destination and felt his limbs nearly giving out, he noticed someone sitting on the ground, both of their knees tucked into their chest, hands wrapped around them as if holding them together, their head limp with eyes closed. Ivan suppressed a smile, knowing it would only intensify the pain he was experiencing. Till had been *waiting* for him; Till realized that Ivan had fallen behind, and he stayed outside, waiting, too afraid to run back for him. And as Ivan started to understand this, his eyes started to wet, silent waterfalls spilling out against all his wishes for them not to; the knot in his chest began to tighten, twisting around, the feeling all too familiar to him by now, seeing Till’s calm expression, asleep, waiting for him.

Coughs echoed in his throat as he tried to muffle them with his left hand. He felt the blood seeping from his lips onto his palms, falling onto the sides of his fingers as he tightened them, avoiding any disturbance to the person he loved.

Taking steady breaths, he managed to calm himself, the sharp pain in his stomach easing up and letting him have a moment of peace. Releasing his lips, petals cascaded to the ground, mingling with the dark red of Ivan's blood, creating a striking contrast with the flower's

bright red hue. Now being able to think clearly, he remembered they were running out of time, the dark sky once illuminated by flying meteors now beginning to turn into a shade of orange, mixing into the deep blue that had been starting to disappear. Ivan couldn't fathom how long they had been gone, his senses dulled and only just beginning to return. He didn't want to wake the sleeping boy, but he had no choice; who knew how much time they had before the guards realized that they had been missing? Steadily lowering one knee to meet the eyes of the figure in front of him, he reached an arm forward, careful not to be too harsh on the boy, and placed his right hand on the crown of his head.

Till's eyes started to open, blinking a few times before taking in the view in front of him. Ivan shone a light smile back at him, as if telling him:

It's okay.

He offered a hand to the boy, who gave him a low groan but ultimately accepted the help that was being given to him. Not being able to meet Ivan's eyes, Till settled for the door in front of them, a metallic grey that glimmered in the light of the sun peeking over. Moving his arm forward and letting it fall on the handle, the reality of what they were going back to settling inside of them. A profound mutual understanding enveloped them, encompassing both their bond and the grim reality awaiting their return. Twisting the handle, they returned to their world of chaos and uncertainty, both longing to be with their loved ones, willing to sacrifice their freedom for them. And even though things would never be the same, they were willing to make that sacrifice.

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you for reading guys! This is a kinda short chapter all things considered but it's just an introduction to the story. If you have any comments or questions please let me know. This is my first fanfic so I want you guys to like it.

Chapter 2: Hide

Chapter Notes

> New chapter to move the story foward a little bit, but scheduled posting will begin on the 19th at 1pm PST, please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Ivan and Till silently stepped into the emotionless hallways of Anakt Garden, they couldn't look each other in the eye. Till was wondering what had happened for Ivan to just disappear and then come back after hours of him waiting, only for him to see red flower petals decorated above a pool of blood, presumably Ivan's. Needless to say, he was confused; his groggy state of mind only made things difficult as he had just woken up. On the other hand, Ivan was preoccupied with struggling to prevent his body from shutting down as they made their way back; perhaps he would explain everything later. Maybe.

They reached their rooms and separated, each going into their own. Ivan turned his head slightly, wanting to sneak a peek of Till, not realizing the boy was already looking at him; Till quickly turned around and opened his bedroom door, rushing inside and slowly closing the door behind him. Ivan sighed, entered his empty room with only a bed and small table, and quietly made his way to his bed, still on edge from what had happened. Feeling too exhausted to change his clothes, he opted to use the white bedsheet as a cover, settling under it and taking slow, cautious breaths until he drifted off to sleep.

As the sun rose, casting a soft blue hue in the sky, children's voices filled the hallway as they headed to class. Ivan had already forgotten how late they had gotten back, only being able to enjoy a few hours of sleep.

After rising, he made his way to the bathroom, catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror. His pale face stared back at him, hints of red on the inside of his lips, his hair a messy tangle of strands going in different directions, and dark eye bags prominently showing from lack of sleep. He approached the sink, turning on the faucet and feeling the cool water cascade over his fatigued face.

knock, knock

Turning toward the sound, he chose to pretend to be asleep, feeling too tired to open the door.

“Come on, Ivan, you have to wake up!”

Knowing he really didn’t have any other choice, he went to the door and opened it just a slight bit; unfortunately, that was enough for the person behind it to push themselves forward and successfully open it completely, landing on top of Ivan.

“Haha, you’re too energetic in the morning, Mizi.” Ivan chuckled after falling on his back, waiting for Mizi to stand up so he could too.

“Ah! I’m so sorry, Ivan.” She quickly apologized, getting quickly on her feet, and offered a hand to Ivan.

“Aww, don’t worry, Mizi, I’m alright.” Ivan took Mizi’s hand and stood up, only now seeing the clothes that had been left on top of his bed.

After ushering Mizi out of the room so he could change, he closed the door, his smile faded, and he quickly went over to the pieces of fabric that were always the same white color. Grabbing his clothes, he went to the bathroom once again, changing from his old, stained clothes to a clean set. He looked at himself in the mirror, inspecting his image; he saw his messy hair and quickly brushed it out. He was now ready to start the day.

On his way out he was greeted by a lot of people walking through the hallway; he always gave them a bright smile. After catching up to Mizi, the two waited for Till and Sua to arrive, not having to wait long as they slowly started coming into view.

“Guys, over here!” Mizi shouted, telling them where they were. The other two saw her immediately, her long pink hair making a bright contrast against the background. Sua started running towards her, while Till wasn’t as eager to start the day as the rest of them were.

Only until Till reached the rest did Ivan notice that the corners of his eyes were ever so slightly red that if Till could actually meet his eyes, he probably wouldn’t have noticed.

Mizi started running, grabbing Sua’s hand. “Come on, we’re going to be late!” Till and Ivan followed the pair, the latter struggling to run with his condition, but he would have to get used to it.

Ivan's throat still hurt a little, so he tried his best not to speak too much; Mizi, on the other hand, seemed to be in high spirits, enthusiastically chatting without pause. Ivan liked that about her, more so her innocence towards the true world; having been adopted by decently loving guardians, she was protected from the horrors that were experienced by the humans on the outside.

"M-mizi!" He looked over and saw Till; his whole face had turned red. "You have something in your hair!" Till didn't mean to shout, but his voice couldn't go any lower. Mizi moved her hands towards her head, trying to get out whatever Till was talking about, although she ultimately gave up, asking him for help in removing it. Getting flustered, he carefully removed a piece of grass stuck in her hair from the ground.

Ivan could only watch in silence, a mix of emotions churning within him. He was aware of Till's long-standing affection for Mizi, but the realization of its obviousness stirred conflicting feelings within Ivan. He couldn't help but feel hurt; physically, he tried his best not to show it on his face, but he had already been acting a bit off, being more quiet than usual that day, and he didn't go unnoticed; Sua was watching silently, perhaps waiting for a chance to question him. She was always like that, a bit quiet but caring, like a little sister would.

Turning his head, he watched the other children playing and enjoying themselves. Some of them were coming out of their classes, while others were hurrying inside, trying not to be late. Happy faces and laughter filled the air all around. He yearned for the blissful ignorance of childhood, wishing he could live free from the knowledge of suffering.

Ivan didn't choose this life; it chose him, and regrettably so. He knew the outside world more than most and knew about the struggles that lived outside the borders he was forcefully placed in. He understood what non-compliance would mean for him, and he did his best to please his "guardian," getting along with the other children residing in Anakt but never truly developing a deeper connection with any of them.

He was popular and had a lot of friends; he even got confessions every now and then, but none of them truly knew him, and the one person he thought did, the one person he showed himself to, just gave him the worst betrayal he could ever feel.

That was a mistake; Ivan shouldn't be thinking about things like that when he's out in the open, for everyone to see. He has to be careful, and he'll have to learn the hard way. He had pushed himself over the edge, feeling his throat constricting, a raspy dryness making swallowing a struggle, and the metallic taste of blood rising in his mouth, a burning reminder of his inner turmoil. He could feel Sua's intent stare placed on him, only making him feel more uncomfortable, knowing someone could possibly see him lose his composure.

His palms started to get sweaty, small coughs escaping his mouth involuntarily, despite his best efforts to contain them. He sprang to his feet, hastily brushing his clammy palms on his clothes, causing a stir among the group. He needed to find a place to hide.

"Whoa! What happened, Ivan?" Mizi jumped in place but quickly stood up to meet Ivan's gaze, giving the boy a concerned look. She had always cared deeply for others; she wanted everyone to be happy.

"I'll go too." The sound of his voice surprised Ivan; he suspected Till would want to avoid him as much as he could; he never thought he would go out of his way to be alone with him, but nonetheless there he was.

"Okay buddy, let's go!" He wrapped his arm around Till's neck, making him groan as a message of disapproval for his actions, dragging him as they're walking away from the two girls. Ivan's mind was racing with questions; why did he come too? Did he notice how he was acting? Does he know what happened to him? What could have possibly-

"Hey, uh, Ivan?" Till came to an abrupt stop, knocking Ivan back to reality; turning to look at him, he noticed that Till couldn't meet his gaze, but before he could respond, Till spoke again. "Are you okay? You look sick." Ivan's eyes widened ever so slightly, his body tensing at the question; of course he wasn't okay, but he would never confess that to him.

"I'm fine, no need to worry!" He brushed off Till's question; he was hurt, yes, but he was happy Till cared about him. "Okay, that's good." He seemed pleased with the answer. "I'll go then." With that, Till left, leaving the black-haired boy standing by himself. Suddenly, Ivan's need to disappear vanished.

Chapter End Notes

This was a short chapter since it's more of a world-building one and for adding the other characters.

Chapter 3: Learn

Chapter Notes

> Ahh sorry its late, my computer refused to turn of for like half an hour but anyways here's chapter 3.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It seems his captors have caught on to Ivan, for everywhere he goes, he can't find a single place in which there aren't guards looking at him, inspecting for any trace of unnaturalness in his behavior. He has grown quite tired of having to desperately search for a place where he could be alone. He will have to learn how to hide his illness if he wishes to live in peace.

Apparently enough time has passed that it is now time for the kids to go back to class, Ivan going to his private piano lessons; he was always pampered for being such a good *pet*; compliance always has its perks.

Arriving at his destination, he enters the music room, a solitary grand piano sitting in the middle of the room, waiting to be played. This was his daily joy, although he did have to teach himself to play, and even though it was difficult, he grew to understand the instrument, falling in love with the music that would come out of it. He learned to play by listening to each note, gradually piecing them together on the music sheet to create a harmonious melody.

The unfamiliar piece he was set to practice that day, titled "Fallen Sky" with no attributed composer, resonated with a sense of mystery and intrigue for Ivan. He intently studied the notes, practicing first with his right hand, then his left. This song was quite easy and short, similar to "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" and "Happy Birthday.". Quickly mastering the composition on both hands, he joined the melody, making the separate pieces make sense when put together. The song was reminiscent of Till, at least in Ivan's ears, for it was quick and strong but also kind, being an easy composition to learn.

He had always admired Till's determination, which was the foundation of his strength. He never backed down from a fight; he always stood up against his jailers, fighting for himself and for others, and he remembers that fateful day that Till saved Mizi's flower crown, the day he realized that Till would be the best person he'll ever meet,

the only person capable of stealing his heart. Oh, how cruel the world was to make him the source of Ivan's suffering.

As he's playing the song, the notes start to sound off, like they don't belong there. He can feel every touch of the keys, every stroke; his clothes start feeling too tight around his body, constricting his movement; his hands start shaking, the once-organized tune now sounding like an off-key piano. His eyes can't seem to focus on anything, moving from place to place without an objective in mind; the room is now spinning. He tries to stand up, but his knees are shaking. Using all the strength he can, he runs. He can't think clearly, his mind too preoccupied feeling the pulse of his heart beating, the blood moving through his veins and going to his limbs.

He was able to get out of the room and run outside, not seeking aid but seeking a place to relax. Guards were almost everywhere, which made it even more difficult with what was happening to Ivan. His heart was racing, his legs were burning, but he couldn't stop; he had to keep going.

Reaching a tree, he was able to lie down on the grass and catch his breath, slowly inhaling and exhaling as he felt his body relaxing. His mind was racing with questions, but only one mattered: What had happened? He thought he was fine now; hadn't the feeling already passed? He didn't understand the complexities of his illness; it was acting erratically, sometimes being too much to bear, while other times feeling as if it never even existed.

He was able to calm down and gather his thoughts, thinking back to all the times he was in pain, and looking back, Ivan is beginning to realize why he doesn't feel sick when being with Till; he would have thought that even going near him would make the disease awaken and attack him, but now he understands that he only feels pain when Till expresses his affections for Mizi, or when he imagines a situation like it, although that does happen fairly often for it to be a risk for him.

He needs to learn and control his feelings, especially when music is involved; he couldn't lose control like he did now. Till would always be at the forefront of his mind when singing, his drive to move forward; he had to practice; change doesn't happen by itself. His feelings for Till would never go away, but he will learn and adapt; he will become one with his sickness and understand how it works. He will persevere, and he will survive.

In his quest for knowledge about his illness, Ivan searched through the library's collection, bypassing fiction and reality-based books, focusing solely on finding a resource to aid in his battle against the disease.

He spent a lot of time searching, not bothering to lose time by checking the clock every now and then, so he had no clue how much time had passed. Desperation was setting in; he was running out of time before curfew was in place. Too scared to ask anyone for help, he came to the conclusion that sleeping in the library would make things easier for him by removing the time limit pressure he had.

After searching around for a small corner, hidden from sight, he had found his bed for that night. As the chilly air enveloped him while he settled on the ground, memories flooded back of his early days, battling for survival in harsh weather conditions, a testament to the resilience he had developed over time.

His eyelids felt heavy, his breaths relaxed, and he drifted off into sleep, curling up into a little ball to keep himself warm.

Awakening earlier than usual, Ivan realized his unmet goal, compelling him to seek its fulfillment to restore the familiar rhythm of his life. He hoped what he was looking for was there and that it would help him, for if not, what could?

Standing up, he started walking over to the bookshelves he hadn’t searched; only a few remained, and he was losing hope. His attention was caught by the spine of a book that was decorated with flowers, almost like he was drawn to it; it was fairly small with only a few pages. Carefully, he took the book in his hands, inspecting the cover; “Hanahaki Disease” was the title, and a pair of lungs with flowers inside of them could be seen in the background. Was this the book he was searching for?

His heart raced with anticipation and fear, torn between the desire to mend his situation and the dread of confronting a reality he may not be prepared for. Slowly, his hand made its way to the edge of the book, slowly lifting the cover up, and he found exactly what he was looking for.

Hanahaki Disease is a disease in which the victim grows flowers inside of their lungs and coughs up flower petals when they suffer from one-sided love. It ends when the beloved returns their feelings or when the victim dies. It can be cured through surgical removal, but when the flowers are surgically removed, so are the victim's feelings of love, meaning they can no

longer love the person they once loved. Sometimes this also removes their memories of the former beloved or the victim's ability to ever love again.

Having a vague understanding of the disease, this only confirmed his suspicions: he was going to die.

For Till to love Ivan, the whole universe would have to be turned upside down, and he knew that, Till would never be able to love him the same way he did, only making his situation more dire by the second. He couldn't force Till to reciprocate his feelings, and surgery certainly wasn't an option; he would rather die than have to never love Till again or even forget him, but his guardian would never understand, so he will never know.

Flipping through the pages, he stumbled upon the "Cures" chapter of the book, the words in them only further emphasizing the fate that awaited him.

When the object of the victim's love returns their affections, thus making the love no longer unrequited. The victim is then cured of the disease. This may happen spontaneously when the object of affections realizes his love, or the disease may require the object to persuade the victim that their love is mutual. If the victim cannot believe that his beloved returns his love, he will die.

It almost seemed like a joke to make him spend so much time searching for an answer to the equation, only to be given one that he himself cannot complete. He had learned that it progressed in different stages, starting from coughing up a few petals and eventually evolving into vomiting entire flowers; by then it had entered the final stage and would become nearly impossible to cure.

Surprisingly, time stood as Ivan's ally, offering a glimmer of hope through the years-long progression of the disease, providing an opportunity to face its challenges. He would make good use of what he had left and make every moment count.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted the chapter to be longer but felt like I ended it at the right time.
Also I just made up the song that Ivan was playing so if anything like that exists its just a coincidence lol.

Chapter 4: Time(skip)

Chapter Notes

> TW for vomiting so if you're uncomfortable with that type of stuff I recommend skipping from "His head spinning" to "Feeling colder as moments passed"
> and from "Slowly raising his hand" to "Limbs shaking"
> Although I believe my writing isn't good enough to cause discomfort, read it at yout own risk!
> Enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ivan is a fast learner, so it didn't take long for him to take control of his illness and himself. As the years passed, his pain continued to intensify, unknown to anyone and destined to remain so.

He would spend sleepless nights just thinking, haunted by memories of the past and the fear of being discovered in the morning with swollen eyes. He understood his emotional boundaries and when to restrain himself, yet awareness did not always translate into action.

Today was no different; it had become part of his daily routine: the constant churning in his stomach, the oppressive weight on his chest, and the persistent metallic taste deep in his throat.

His head spinning, thoughts spiraling out of control, and nothing seemed to come into focus, the enveloping darkness of the room offering no solace. He felt a surge of nausea rising inside him, providing only a fleeting warning before it erupted violently. He swiftly covered his mouth, preventing the contents from spilling out until it was safe to do so.

The bathroom door seemed so far, going further away as he took every step. Closing his eyes, he used his free hand to feel his surroundings and reach the door handle, crawling inside to the cold, tiled floor, moving towards the toilet and pushing himself up and over it.

Carefully removing his hand from his mouth, he felt the bits and pieces that were once in his stomach go upwards through his throat and out his mouth, leaving a bloody metallic trace, carrying over petals and flower buds, saliva falling alongside it, only making the

feeling even more unbearable; knees shaking, struggling to stay in place as he spit out any remains.

His jaw was trembling, the disgust he felt still lingering in the air as the smell remained in the enclosed space. Covering his nose, he flushed the toilet and let himself drop onto the floor. Feeling colder as moments passed, he shook as he brought his knees into his chest, seeking warmth and slowly falling asleep.

Upon waking up, Ivan found himself still on the bathroom floor. He rose to his feet cautiously, mindful of his balance, still feeling a bit lightheaded from the previous night. Looking in the mirror, he saw how he was taller than when it first started, his hair having a slight curl compared to what used to be pin-straight hair, his body bony and skinny from his lack of appetite and recent vomiting. He knew he was getting skinnier and losing muscle, but he was ready to deal with the consequences a long time ago.

Aliens weren't exactly the most empathetic beings, only using humans for their own gain, so Ivan had to make sure they gained a lot if he wanted to continue his facade, and although he wanted nothing more than to be put out of his misery and let live a normal, human life, he knew he was asking for the impossible.

He didn't need to hide; people would just assume that he woke up and wanted to have an early start to the day, but it was quite the opposite; not yet wanting to socialize with other people, he opted for sneaking out before anyone came to wake him up. He went outside and towards the trees, after all these years having become a sense of comfort in his life, a place where he could breathe.

This peace would be short-lived, as he didn't check what time it was and failed to realize that it wasn't so early in the morning as he had hoped, seeing the rest of the kids coming out of the rooms. Fortunately, he was far enough away from them to be hidden from them, still feeling a bit shaken up and not wanting to interact with anyone yet.

He waited till classes started to begin talking with people, getting a couple smiles and "hello"'s as he crossed the long hallway. Noticing Mizi and Sua standing outside of a door, he went over to greet them with a smile, noticing Mizi's concerned expression and Sua's tired demeanor.

"Hi, girls."

At that, he saw Mizi rapidly turn her head around with a shocked look on her face.

“Ivan?! I thought you were being examined! Where were you?”

Giving a low chuckle, Ivan explained himself. “I was just in the bathroom; had a bit of a stomach flu.” A lie.

“Spare us the details.” This came from Sua, appearing a bit tired, with small eye bags under her eyes.

“Are you okay? Are you sick? You look a bit pale.” Ivan quickly dismissed Mizi’s worry, saying it was nothing to worry about, because it wasn't; it didn’t exist.

Ivan knew how kind Mizi was, and he knew that if he told them anything that would be out of character for him, she would overwhelm him with worried questions, wondering what was off. He didn’t want to have to explain himself every time he wanted to get away from people, so he didn’t tell them.

Till came out of the room; apparently the girls had been waiting outside for him while Ivan arrived. Their eyes locked, and Ivan offered him a bright smile, Till just giving him a small nod.

“Where were you? Mizi was looking for you.”

He seemed a bit mad at him, probably for making Mizi worry about him. He ruffled Till’s hair, having already answered the question and not feeling like repeating himself; the girls could tell him.

“Well, I gotta go again; see you after class.”

And with that he left the three of them and went off on his own, walking slowly so as to not strain himself too much, seeing only a few black spots clouding his vision. *Good, it’s not so bad* , he thought, but the day was just starting, wasn’t it?

Class ended, and he went to his usual spot, the tree not so far away from the rest but far enough to be alone, or so he thought, for when he arrived at his destination, he saw someone else there, a familiar figure sitting on the grass, white collar attached to his neck, practicing a song with an imaginary guitar, too tuned in to hear the slow steps of someone behind him, getting just close enough to remove their collar with a simple touch.

It always happened like that; Ivan would remove the collar from behind, leaving Till to be ever so slightly more free.

“Stay.”

His hand came to a halt, a wave of emotions overcoming him. He was surprised by the request but would never disobey it. So he did; he went over beside Till and dropped down, sitting with his legs in front of him on the ground.

“So, what are you playing?” He eagerly starts a conversation, not wanting the moment to be over too soon.

“Nothing important, just a song for Mizi.” Of course he was; why did he even ask?

“ *Nothing important,* huh? I thought you liked her.” Ivan mocked Till, making sure he got embarrassed and tried to defend himself; at least that would make him turn his way.

“What—No! That’s not—you know what I mean!” His face got red, his arms moving around to further prove his point; the look he gave Ivan only made him enjoy this more, for now.

“So,” he went forward and grabbed the pieces of paper on the ground. “Is this a new song?”

“Hey, don’t touch that! And yeah, it is.” Till quickly took the music sheets from Ivan’s hands and placed a hand behind his neck, embarrassed about the topic of conversation, regretting having told Ivan to sit with him.

"Aw, come on, let me see!”

Ivan insisted, but he would get nothing but groans and scowls in return; Till really didn’t want him to see what he had composed.

“If you’re not gonna show me, at least let me hear it!”

This was a compromise Till was more open to, although it would still be very embarrassing for him.

“Alright, alright, I’ll sing it. Just stop bothering me, okay?”

“Deal.”

With the confirmation, Till began to sing, or more so hum; he was still

in the process of writing and had only just finished the composition, so all he could offer Ivan were the notes. But he would always be happy with anything Till gave him.

The song was incredible; you could tell it was written by Till with the upbeat mood it made. He liked faster-paced music that didn't dwell too long on a single note; it felt more real to him, filled with more emotion.

He wished Till would write about him like that, feel deeply enough about him to go to the lengths of making a song for him. What would it feel like to be truly loved by someone? He couldn't help but feel lost, the music echoing in the background as he imagined what that would be like, ignoring the weight on his chest and the shake of his hands. His breaths became more jagged and quick, his heart beating fast, pumping blood that moved through his veins to make his body work.

Why couldn't Till love him like that? Why must he keep resorting to tricks in order to get his attention?

He sealed his fate long ago, and having doubts now wouldn't change anything. He knew Till would never reciprocate his feelings, and he chose to die knowing no one would ever love him like he loved them.

Every time he looked at Till, it was a constant reminder of the choice he made. He inflicted this upon himself, and every emotion he experienced was a consequence of his decisions. Despite his agency, the sharp pains persisted, piercing him from within, a cruel reminder of his inner turmoil. He could feel the shape of the flowers as they grew and moved inside him, every twitch they made only increasing his pain.

Till came to an abrupt stop, cutting his song in half. Ivan looked up to him only to see that he was looking somewhere else, at *someone* else. He didn't need to look in order to know who he was looking at, but nonetheless he did.

Mizi was playing with the other kids, having fun with her friends, running around, and chasing each other. Ivan looked back to Till, the look on his face only making him feel worse. His eyes were shining, full of life, full of love.

Ivan was worried that Till would see him lose his composure, but of course he wouldn't; he didn't pay that much mind to him, and he quickly proved him right as he stood up and went running toward

Mizi, leaving Ivan sitting on the ground by himself. He was glad Till left at just the right moment, but at the same time couldn't help but feel even more pain for knowing who he left him for.

Slowly raising his hand to lean on the tree beside him, he turned around, not risking anyone seeing what was about to happen. His body pressed to the tree, not being able to support himself, skin sweating, heart beating. Dry coughs escaped his lips, leaving flower petals to drop down to the ground; his throat was burning, he felt desperate, scratching at his neck, hoping to stop the itching underneath his flesh.

His stomach felt empty as he felt its contents make their way up, choosing an alternate form to escape by. His breathing became more labored, his chest heaving as it struggled to draw in air. He tried to keep the flowers from coming out, but all his efforts were in vain, as soft petals trailed up his lungs, cutting their way through his throat, and onto his mouth, along with pieces of undigested food that made keeping everything in unbearable.

The feeling was too strong for Ivan; he did his best not to acknowledge it, but he was disgusted. His mouth opened as a reflex, letting its contents pour out, splatting as they hit the ground; the smell was horrible, blood mixed with the remains of his meal.

He spat out any residue lingering inside his mouth and dropped to the floor. Limbs shaking as he saw the image in front of him. He had not only vomited blood and petals, as well as food; he was horrified. He was scared.

The metallic taste still lingering in his throat, the cuts in it would need time to heal, but he wasn't focused on that; something else had caught his attention, something much more important.

In front of him rested a single-bloomed flower, its petals opened up and shining brightly with blood. Before this it would only be flower petals and buds, but now, there really was no turning back; his childhood choice was now solidified. He didn't have much time left.

Chapter End Notes

> I wish I could make the chapters as long as it took me to write them but in hindsight I should really stop and read them as I'm going to make sure they're not going too fast or too slow. Anyways I hope you enjoyed it!!

Chapter 5: Fight

Chapter Notes

> I hope you guys are enjoying this story!! I'm starting school in two days so its posible that updates might slow down a bit but I'll try my best to keep publishing every week!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Slowly standing up, he dusts off his clothes, legs still a bit weak, barely able to support him, but they're his only hope to move forward. He looks down at the mess he made, the beautiful green shade of the grass now stained with dark red blood, and he realizes the burden he has become.

He makes his way over to the rooms, hoping for no one to notice his afflicted state. The hallways of the building, usually bustling with activity, were surprisingly empty, providing Ivan with a moment of relief to catch his breath. His room wasn't too far, but due to his condition, he had to proceed slowly to reach it.

Step after step the feeling became increasingly strenuous; he could feel the strength leave his bones as his weight was pressed onto the ground. His door came into view, and he felt his body relax more.

As he reached his destination, he opened the door and walked over to the bathroom mirror, inspecting for anything that might look out of place or unkempt. His sunken cheeks revealed more of his bones, emphasizing his gaunt appearance. Hair stiff and dry, any brightness appearing to be taken away. He was getting skinnier each day, muscle slowly disappearing, removing any strength he once had.

The taste in his mouth remained unpleasant, and the scent that wafted into his nose with every breath reminded him of decay. He quickly grabbed a toothbrush and brushed his teeth harshly, removing any visible imperfections.

His clothes had gotten dirty, traces of mud blending into the white cotton. Grabbing a freshly cleaned set, he removed the dirty pieces of clothing and discarded them, now putting the new outfit on and preparing to make his way out.

The pain in his throat wouldn't go away; sometimes even moving his neck would be too painful. It felt like something was scratching him

from the inside out, desperate for a way to escape. He couldn't even begin to imagine how a wound like this could be cured by any medicine, and even if there was, he would have to ask for help, and that would risk everything he has done so far.

Opting for a different course of action, Ivan simply decided to let his throat rest—not speak, not turn his head too fast, and definitely not eat until he knew the injury was at least slightly healed. Eating could worsen the cuts and increase the risks.

If food wasn't an option, he could at least try to drink water; if anything, it might help to clear up whatever blood had remained, or at least he could hope so.

There was a clear glass of water on his nightstand; he didn't know how long it had been there, but it was his first solution. Drinking the water didn't do what he had hoped for; each swallow felt like fire passing through his throat, burning it in the process. Chugging the last few drops with difficulty, he rested the cup back on the table, tracing his hand around his neck in an attempt to relieve his pain, although it would prove unfruitful.

Moving to the outside, he couldn't think of an activity he could do that didn't require speaking to anyone, before remembering the library, a place of comfort, that at the moment now means a place of quiet. Even if that's what it's meant to be most of the time.

The library wasn't far from where he was, although he would have to sneak around in order to not have to engage in trivial conversations that would only risk blowing his cover. So he moved with the trees, hiding behind them whenever he saw someone getting too close for comfort.

Strategically moving in order not to be seen, he reached his destination; tall bookshelves enveloped every wall, reaching the ceiling, big stairs connected to them with wheels for easy operation. Entering the room, the nice librarian hollered Ivan over, meaning to say something to him.

"I know how much you like to read books, Ivan." She lowered her voice into a whisper, not wanting to disturb anyone else that was there. "So, I saved up the new arrivals so that you would be the first to read them."

Ivan's heart warmed up at the gift, and even though not many kids read books like he did—most just not finishing them or not even

bothering to pick up one—it was the thought that counted.

Offering his gratitude with a smile, he made his way over to the bookshelf filled with new books, scanning for anything that might catch his attention, stumbling upon a rather familiar book, with the flowers that sprung from the cover making their way over to the spine. He picked it up, confused; he had read this book before, many times, so why would it be on the new books shelf?

As he inspected the cover, he realized it was, in fact, not that same book. This one appeared to be a rewrite of the original. The pages didn't have the same look of antiquity, and the publishing date seemed to be a more recent one.

But why would someone rewrite the original? Did they find out new information that hadn't been in the first one? Could there be a possibility of salvation for Ivan?

Upon realizing this, he quickly found an empty spot on a table, not too far away from the entrance. Sitting down, he opened the book with haste, filled with hope for a brand new start. He didn't want to accidentally skip over any new piece of information, even if it was only a sentence, so he read the book from the beginning.

Normally the library would be empty, except for Ivan and the librarian, but today it seemed like people were just now discovering what a book was, so the quiet of the room would be momentarily interrupted every now and then; the shuffling of clothes, steps around the floor, deep and heavy breaths, every slight noise could and would be heard by anyone nearby.

But none of those sounds compared to the shouting from outside, growing louder with each passing second; it was really distracting. Ivan couldn't tell who was screaming or what; he just knew they were being bothersome to everyone inside the library, just trying to get some peace and quiet, like him.

As the person kept getting closer, their voice becoming clearer as well, Ivan could begin to figure out who the person was. They emitted a light growl at times, as if not happy with their current situation. Voice dry and raspy, probably from all the shouting they were doing.

And just as he was about to hit the nail on the dot, the voice abruptly stopped. Everyone else was relieved they could be quiet again, but Ivan was annoyed he couldn't successfully deduce who the person was. This feeling would only last a short while, though, as a figure

started approaching the semi-transparent library door.

Ivan was filled with anticipation, getting too lost within his thoughts to remember what he had been reading. The door handle turned, a grey-haired boy peeking his head through the door as it made an excruciating creak upon opening.

Till had never been the type to be interested in reading—at least if it wasn't related to music—and the library wasn't exactly the place where the aliens would keep music books. Needless to say, Ivan was a bit surprised to see him there.

It seemed that Till was equally as shocked, but not out of surprise, for when his eyes landed on Ivan, his eyebrows furrowed. He had been the person shouting outside, and he was calling for Ivan, who had no clue this had been going on.

He furiously stomped his way over to Ivan, the wooden floor squeaking underneath him, acquiring many side-glances and frustrated petitions for quiet. As the boy came closer, Ivan was getting increasingly nervous. What could he have possibly done to get him mad? Not prepared to face him, the dark-haired boy lowered his face, covering it with the book he was reading.

"Hey!"

What an interesting book.

"I'm talking to you!"

This writer sure is ingenious!

"Are you seriously playing the quiet game!?"

With that, Ivan finally lifted his head, but not to speak. He gave the boy an incredulous look, doubting if he really was as dense as he appeared. Slowly, he lifted a finger to his mouth, motioning him to stop talking.

"What are you—oh, right."

He cleared his throat, it still being a bit sore, but he had no other alternative at the moment. He lowered his voice as much as possible, not wanting to be a nuisance to anyone that would hear him.

"Why are you so angry?" He was genuinely curious; if Till had been

the one shouting, was he shouting for him?

“I’ve been looking for you for the past *hour*.” He had understood the message being emitted by the atmosphere in the room and lowered his voice drastically.

“Oh really?” He fought back a cough as a slight smirk was placed on his face, being quickly dismissed by the recipient.

“Yeah, you suddenly disappeared; Mizi and I were looking for you.”

As he reflected on the events from only a while ago, memories came flooding in. He glanced back at the book in his hands, suddenly remembering why he was there in the first place.

“I went down the hill, and when I turned around, bam! You’re gone.”

“Aw, were you worried about me?”

The look on his face turned into a more serious one, startling Ivan. “Look,” his tone lowered even more. “You’ve been acting weird lately, and Mizi is starting to get worried.”

Not you?

“I don’t care to know whatever you’re doing whenever you disappear, but at least give Mizi some type of explanation.”

Mizi.

All of a sudden Ivan didn’t have any enthusiasm to continue speaking, averting Till’s gaze by returning to his book.

“Oh wow, quiet game again, huh?” He was progressively getting more and more irritated, patience running thin.

“What are you even reading anyway? Is *this* where you go every time you disappear?”

Ivan raised the book in his hands, moving it so that Till could read the cover.

“*Hanahaki Disease*? What even is that?”

Till’s patience wasn’t the only one running thin; Ivan had started to get annoyed with his constant questioning. He simply moved the book closer to Till, allowing him to read alongside him, however slow it

may be.

“Is this real? How can something like this even happen?”

Ivan just shrugged; he had asked this to himself many times, not understanding why the body would do this to itself. Out of love? Out of pity? Was there even an answer?

“This has to be fake! How could someone grow flowers inside their lungs!? You need, like, dirt for that!”

And a seed, sunlight, and water, but that's besides the point.

There truly was no real explanation for any of it; the only thing he could know for certain was that it was real and, undoubtedly, extremely painful.

“Actually,” his voice sounded rough, desperately begging to give his vocal cords a rest. “I overheard some aliens talking about a friend of theirs that died because of this.”

“Really? So what, you get this and you die? That’s depressing.”

And suddenly, Ivan felt all the tension he had held through those last years disappear; this was the first time he had ever talked to anyone about it. He was glad that it was Till; at least there could be a slight comprehension of the situation he was in.

He flipped the pages until he arrived at the chapter titled "Cures," placing his index finger on it, indicating Till to read.

“Huh, but if there’s a cure, why would anyone that gets it die?”

Do you seriously not understand?

“You can just get surgery.”

Stop talking.

“Honestly, whoever chooses to die because of a little crush is just an idiot.”

Stop.

“You would just forget the person; who cares?”

The world seemed to come to a halt, and Ivan stopped feeling the

aching in his throat.

To say he was shocked was an understatement; Ivan had never looked at Till with so much discontent. He thought that if anyone were to understand his situation, it would be him; he would understand what it felt like to love someone unreachable but still be unable to let go of them.

“What, why are you looking at me like—”

“Stupid?” His voice was deep and raspy, not sparing any energy to keep up his happy-go-lucky facade.

Till’s eyes widened at Ivan’s change in demeanor, his usually playful attitude now completely gone.

“Do you really think people that do that are stupid?”

“I mean, yeah. You’re giving up your entire life for a single person that doesn’t even like you back.”

Ivan couldn’t really be mad at him; Till was right; he *was* stupid; he *was* giving up his life for someone that barely looked at him. But for him, it was worth it. It was a beautiful way to die even, enveloped by flowers as they slowly became a part of you, and even though it was a foolish thing to do, he wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Would you do it?”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“If you had that disease, would you get the surgery?”

“Uh, duh? Why would I die for someone else?”

Liar.

“Even if it was Mizi?”

Till got quiet; the words faltered as they were coming closer to his mouth, unable to offer any response, accepting the corner he was now placed in.

“Even if there was the chance that you would completely forget about her, be unable to love her ever again? Would you do it then?”

Ivan knew the answer, but nonetheless, he had to ask; he needed to

hear it come out of his own mouth.

“Would you rather die or forget her altogether?”

No one spoke for what seemed to be centuries, passing by in a single second. The quiet was unsettling, even for a library. Tension in the room only grew as they reached the dramatic peak of their argument. The once people-filled room was left empty, not a single being left that would have been able to make a sound.

Breaking the excruciating silence, Till finally spoke:

“Come on, man, that’s not fair. You know the answer to that.”

I do.

“Yeah, it isn’t.”

And with that, Ivan stormed off, leaving the book abandoned on the table without bothering to return it to its original place. In this moment there was nothing he wanted to do more than get out of there, quickly. He couldn’t stand to look Till in the eye anymore; he hadn’t done anything wrong, but Ivan still felt betrayed. He never thought the first time talking about his disease would turn out this way.

His chest tightened, but he paid it no mind, running back to his room to hopefully get away from everyone. He ran until his feet hurt, and when he turned around, the library was far, far away from him. Steadying his breathing, he went back to his room, slowly calming down as if to not have another occurrence.

The space was dark, the lights having been turned off hours ago. The bedsheet covers were strewn haphazardly, a visual reflection of his scattered thoughts and lack of concern at that moment. Silence was the only thing he truly needed; it brought him comfort.

But now, he had to deal with the consequences of his actions; he had acted carelessly and forgotten the current situation he was in; he couldn't afford to keep having so many mishaps, not when he was this far.

The sharp pain in his throat served as a stark reminder of the weight of his responsibilities, urging him to maintain composure and self-discipline. If anyone found out what had been plaguing his life for years, there would be no turning back. His guardian would likely

deem him a failed experiment, leading to the abandonment of the life he painstakingly built, reducing him to a mere disposable entity.

All of his efforts to relieve the pain would be in vain, as it was an internal problem, and simply using an ointment or massaging wouldn't help him at all. The only thing he could do was drink more water, still not feeling restored enough to pick up eating again.

He spots the empty glass on the nightstand and picks it up, going to the sink to fill it with water.

This will have to do.

After shutting off the water, he took careful gulps, cautious not to be too rough on himself by accident.

This day had proven itself exhausting, draining every ounce of energy Ivan once had; he needed a desperate break. Approaching his bed, he tried to make himself comfortable, feeling the heavy sheets fall onto him, easing the tension in his limbs. If he couldn't find any form of relief, he would need to forget about the pain.

He closed his eyes, trying not to focus on the throbbing in his throat. The darkness enveloped him as his thoughts started to gradually grow faint, ultimately granting him one last sigh as they disappeared.

Till was left alone in the library, silently cursing himself for letting Ivan disappear again; he was supposed to bring him back, and he had failed his task. He felt guilty for making him mad and having to ultimately return to Mizi empty-handed.

He dragged his feet as he slowly made his way back outside, not wanting to ponder on the scene that had played out and what he would have to come back to, bracing himself for the inevitable scolding he would receive.

The rest of the kids were coming into view when Till fixed his gaze on Mizi, her radiant smile reaching him from a distance; her cheerful attitude was contagious and warmed his heart. Next to her was Sua, who was a stark contrast to Mizi, their personalities so opposite you could question how they were so close.

But Till knew; he observed them frequently, not in a creepy manner, but out of a deep sense of longing and admiration. He would watch them sing since they were little, hoping that maybe she would turn

around and sing with him too, but Mizi and Sua were a perfect duet, and Till was just the chords in the background.

They have always stuck together since they were little, and he knew there would never be a possibility for him to be with her, but love isn't something you can control. It hits you and forces you to yearn for the impossible, and you can either thank it or spit in its face, but it will never leave you; it will always be there, in the back of your mind, no matter how hard you try to stop it.

Upon recalling his "conversation" with Ivan, he started questioning himself; he knew he loved Mizi and she didn't love him back, so why didn't he have the Hanahaki Disease? Did he actually love her enough to get it, or was there something else going on? If it truly existed, how rare could it be to contract it? He would have to go back to the library and figure it out himself, regretting starting the argument and not getting enough information.

Although now looking back on it, whenever he saw the both of them together, he would get this feeling, deep down inside him, like if someone took the soul out of his body. His chest would tighten as he felt his limbs give out, feeling weightless as if defying gravity.

But now, that pit at the bottom of his stomach had disappeared, being replaced by a sense of joy, seeing the person who was once the owner of his heart find happiness, even if it were with someone else. He had found bliss in Mizi's delight.

Thinking back to try and remember when that change first occurred, he reflected on the times in which he and Ivan would fight or quarrel, while also recounting all the nice things he would do for him. There had been an odd change to Ivan's actions ever since that fateful day, a day Till had fought to forget after all these years.

He wanted to forget about it because he felt guilty and couldn't understand how Ivan could even look him in the eye after it; if he were in his place, they would have never spoken again. They had finally been free, and if it weren't for Till's feelings for Mizi, they would have been long gone from Anakt Garden years ago, but now, they remained here, and it was all Till's fault.

Ivan never blamed him for it; he never confronted him or got angry at him for it. He came back and forgave him, not showing even an ounce of anger on his face as he did. And Till hated him for it; he hated how carefree he was, his playfulness around him only feeling like even

more torture for him. He hated how Ivan never got mad at him, how easily he would be forgiven and not have to face the reprimand he deserved for his actions.

Were those feelings of hate really existent, or did he make himself believe that to not think of all the guilt he had been holding?

He would always get mixed signals from Ivan, fighting one day and acting all affectionate the next; he had no clue what his true intentions ever were; did he hate him or had he always loved him?

Love?

What does love have to do with this?

Nonetheless, it didn't matter anymore; that decision was made many years ago, and there was no turning back. The only thing he could do was live in the present and not dwell in the past, although to finally have closure, he would need to officially apologize to Ivan. Apologize for leaving him there that night, apologize for forcing him to come back, and apologize for all the suffering his choice had caused him.

He didn't have to question whether or not Ivan would forgive him, for he already had, but it hadn't felt genuine, perhaps because he never believed himself to be deserving of forgiveness.

The real challenge would be to have a real and deep conversation with Ivan without getting into an argument and getting lost within his emotions. The last thing he wanted was to have to do it more than once. His body shivered at the thought; it would be greatly embarrassing for him.

His heart beat rapidly, bracing himself for the unavoidable, the anxiety causing him to break into a sweat. *Is it hot in here? It felt like it.* Either way, he had to think carefully of his words before being able to approach Ivan, saying the wrong thing could turn the whole exchange up on its head.

Returning to reality, Till decided it best to not disturb Mizi with Ivan's most recent vanishing. If he truly wanted to explain himself, he would, and if she decided to confront him personally, there was nothing she couldn't get out of him.

Preferring to be alone, he went to one of the trees close to him and lay down beside it, hoping to be able to get the tiniest bit of sleep before being thrown into any more fights. Perhaps he would dream of a

better life, without aliens dictating every step he made; the life he would have gotten if he had never run back.

Chapter End Notes

This is the longest chapter I've written so far, almost 4k words!!

Chapter 6: Truths

Chapter Notes

> Omg guys sorry for being so late, (I was gonna post it yesterday and forgot) I'm only now realizing it was a bad idea to give myself a weekly deadline. Anyways, new chapter yayyyy!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Enough time had passed that now Till was safe to inform Mizi about Ivan's disappearance, although he still felt a bit uneasy about his recent reflections.

He didn't have time to think about them any longer as he slowly approached the pink-haired girl, clasping his hands behind his back to hide the nervousness that would be shown by the sweat coming from them. Taking small steps, trying to not alarm the girl, slowly inhaling and exhaling in an effort to calm his rapid beating heart.

Till didn't really know what he was nervous about; Mizi wouldn't be mad at him; she would understand his situation and never put the blame on him, but still, he couldn't help but feel anxious about delivering such disappointing news, especially to such a kindhearted, caring girl.

He wanted to have the first word so as to not worry her but utterly failed as Mizi saw and called out for him with such an energetic voice.

"Till! Did you find him?" Her smile shone brightly, hoping her wish got granted.

"About that…"

He knew Mizi would go looking for Ivan herself and spend all her time looking for him, she couldn't bear to see any of her friends suffer by themselves, and it was pretty obvious that something was strange with Ivan. The choices echoed inside his head as he pondered: would he tell her the truth and leave with a clean conscience, or would he lie to save her from inevitable concern for something that was ultimately out of her control?

Just tell her the truth; she will be mad if you lie to her.

But he couldn't, and even though he wasn't too sure how he felt about

her anymore, Mizi was still his friend, and he deeply cared for her. He had loved her for years, and all of that time spent yearning wouldn't be wiped clean by a single realization.

"He wanted to be alone for a bit; apparently there's this book he's reading."

He wasn't completely lying, right? This *had* happened, it *was* true; he was just omitting parts of the story that were *irrelevant* for her to know.

"Are you sure he's fine? He looked pretty sick in the morning."

She's worrying; make her stop.

"No, yeah, he's probably just a bit tired from singing and all."

"Are you one hundred percent sure? I just want to be certain."

Why do you care so much about him?

His eyebrows slightly furrowed, eyelids drooping ever so slightly, so little so that she didn't seem to notice. *Is this what they call jealousy? Did this confirm his love for Mizi?* But this had never happened before, not with the other kids, not even with Sua. She and Ivan are best friends; it's not weird to worry about a friend acting strange, but this seemed a bit too much, even for her; how many times does he need to reassure her that everything is fine until she believes him?

"Hello!! Till, stop spacing out!"

Huh? What?

"Are you okay? You seem a bit out of it."

"What? Oh, yeah, I'm fine."

Was he zoning out? He didn't even notice, not when his skin started feeling warmer, cheeks flushing with the blood that rapidly came up to his face. His palms started sweating even more, not even wiping them on his shirt would make the humid feeling vanish as they continued getting more slippery, making it difficult for him to keep holding them together.

He saw as she slowly lifted her hand toward his face, moving the back of it closer and closer to his forehead, wanting to check his temperature as the boy started getting redder. He never thought that

telling such a simple, small lie would in turn make the conversation about him and his well-being.

Getting more flustered by the second, he slightly pushed her hand away, reassuring her that everything was fine, because if she had managed to do what she intended, he would be taken to the infirmary on suspicions of sickness, and there wasn't anyone that could say no to Mzi.

"Are you sure you're fine? You're acting strange too!"

He never thought he could get annoyed by her, but the constant questioning and dismissal of his answers didn't offer any aid to the already stressed Till.

"Without a doubt, don't worry!"

And with that he left, not bothering to wait for a response from her so as to not get angry and lash out. The previous fight with Ivan had already left him irritated, even more as he had to cover for him, although he never asked him to.

Mizi stood there, alone, not fully understanding what had just happened; everything happened so quickly that in the end, she was left with more questions than answers, seeing Ivan acting off, followed by Till behaving out of character. *What was going on?*

Mizi had decided to look for answers; if no one was going to give them to her, she would have to find them herself.

Getting up from bed, she recounted yesterday's events, planning out her next course of action. Till had been convinced that Ivan was fine and just tired, so she would verify that and then question them about Till's behavior; surely one of them noticed that something was unusual as well.

She quickly got ready and ran fast toward Ivan's room, making her first stop of the day. After hearing some ruffling through the other side of the door, she lifted her hand and knocked three times, eager to finally see him after having gone MIA the last day.

The door slowly opened, and when he set his eyes on her, his smile grew wider as they greeted each other.

"Hi, Ivan! I'm glad you're okay; I barely saw you at all yesterday!" She

lifted her fist and lightly punched him on the shoulder, the latter dramatically massaging said place, pretending to be hurt. “You really had me worried!”

“Sorry, sorry. I was just reading and lost track of time, I guess.”

He made an embarrassed expression, apologizing for his actions and promising to never worry her again.

“I won’t do it again, I promise.”

“You better! I even had Till go look for you!”

The pair started walking through the hallways that surrounded the rooms, their grey walls appearing to shine a brighter color, the mood having lightened up after yesterday’s mishaps. Not taking too long, they arrived near the exit, seeing a stoic Sua who was slumped over the wall while waiting for them to get there. The three said their hellos and good mornings, standing by until Till arrived as well.

Mizi hadn’t forgotten her plan; phase one was complete. Now all she needed to do was confirm her suspicions of odd behavior regarding Till with her two dark-haired friends.

She looked around into the hallway and to the people outside, being mindful of anyone that might be close enough to hear them, if there truly wasn’t anything wrong, she didn’t want anyone else to get the wrong idea.

Confirming that even if Till was just around the corner, the long hallway would prevent him from being able to listen to their conversation until he got closer—

“Something on your mind, Mizi?”

She was shaken from her thought upon being called to, deciding now’s the time to express her concern.

“Well actually… yeah, kind of,” her gaze lowered, not wanting to be proven wrong and embarrassing herself in the process. “Don’t you think Till is acting strange? I talked with him yesterday morning, and the next time I did, he was acting off, as if he were mad and barely even paid attention to me. Am I crazy? Did any of you talk to him after that?”

The two people in front of her exchanged a small glance; it happened

so fast that if she weren't searching their features for any indications of approval, she wouldn't have seen it.

"I did talk to him, but he seemed alright to me; maybe he was just tired." The charismatic boy answered without a second thought, offering her a warm smile, making her worry disappear every passing second. But not entirely, not until she heard the same words come from Sua.

The girl could be seen looking elsewhere; when Mizi followed her gaze, she was met with Till, who was just about to reach them; she needed an answer before it became too late.

While she was focused on him, Sua looked over to Ivan, giving him a questioning look. The boy avoided her gaze, already aware of what she was referencing; he wasn't in the mood to have a conversation about Till yet.

Before Mizi could take notice of their interaction, Sua rapidly returned to normal, looking at her while giving Til the occasional glance every now and then, waiting for him to reach them.

"Sua, what do you think? He's almost here."

She was desperate, truly believing now was the only chance she had, and there was no way she would waste it.

"I think he's fine, but I didn't talk to him yesterday."

With that Mizi let out a breath she didn't realize she had kept in, relief moving through her body, feeling her limbs lose tension as she went back to her cheerful attitude, pleased with hearing there was nothing wrong with any of his friends; her mission was now complete.

Looking back at Till, she waved him over, now feeling content that everyone was okay. Not before realizing that something was wrong, looking at him more closely, she saw how his eyes were almost unable to look forward, only focusing on the cold floor and walls that surrounded them. His hands were crossed on his chest, moving slightly with each heavy step that he took. *Ivan and Sua are wrong. Do they really not see this?*

She had no more time to contemplate as he got closer, offering greetings, his voice only just high enough to be able to hear, not even bothering to look at them while he did; and without uttering another word, he moved forward, waiting for them to go.

Mission failed.

He didn't seem tired, more so avoidant, and that was definitely not something he did, especially not to her. There was, without a doubt, something wrong, and no one wanted to tell her what.

Sua is quiet, but she is observant, so it wasn't a surprise when she went to confront Ivan; they both knew something was off and didn't want to tell Mizi about it, but what's the problem in telling each other?

It happened just a few seconds after their classes had ended, she was careful not to let anyone see them enter the hallway, or more so see her follow Ivan into the dark passageway.

Before she could even begin the interrogation, Ivan sprinted off down the hall, desperately wishing to avoid the inevitable conversation, or at least postpone it as much as he could; he wasn't ready yet.

But Sua wasn't letting him get away, and even though she was short and frail, Ivan had been steadily losing his strength. She didn't take long to catch up to him and forcefully grab him by the arm to make him stop.

Her hand squeezed more than she thought it would, her face turning into one of shock, her eyebrows filled with worry as she inspected Ivan's figure, noticing all the spaces in which his clothes would hang loosely.

The dark-haired boy quickly shoved her hand off of him, moving his gaze to the side, not wanting to be haunted by the look in her eyes, the very look he had fought so hard all these years to avoid.

Sua isn't an idiot; she knows there's something terribly wrong happening around her. Ivan was strong; he was fast. *How did she catch up to him?* Without a second thought, she slapped her firm hand on his face, forcibly making him look at her.

His eyes widened as he lifted a hand to his cheek, feeling the sting of the slap he had received and moving his eyes forward, but as he did, he regretted it instantly.

Sua's face had sprung red splotches, her eyebrows furrowed as her eyes started watering, warm liquid falling onto her cheeks and down her neck. She used her fists to try and dry her face, frantically moving

while trying to suppress hiccups.

Ivan stood there, not knowing what to do; he had no idea how to comfort her, and there was no way he was going to get help in an empty corridor. His mouth opened, hoping the words would magically come out without him having to think of which ones, but he was interrupted.

“W-what’s h-happening?”

Her voice startled him; it was filled with worry and pain, her light sniffles echoing around them as he stayed quiet.

There was a loud thud as her knees hit the ground, tired of supporting her. They might be strong, but they were still just kids, and seeing their friends in pain while being in such a bleak situation only made their pain more intense.

“What are you talking about? Nothing’s happening.” He tried his best to disguise his lies, but the facade had already fallen; his mask fell to the ground and shattered into a million pieces very long ago.

“D-don’t lie to me!”

His hands reached to hold her shoulders, holding her together.

“Hey, *breathe*.”

Her cries slowly died down, as did her hiccups, shaking while taking each steady breath.

In and out.

“Are you okay?”

They were both still on the ground, holding each other in a tight embrace while their heartbeats calmed down. Ivan knew he was the cause of her suffering, and he felt awful for it.

Never in a million years would he have thought to do something as stupid as what he was about to do, but she deserved to know. If she were battling with what he was, he would hope to be trusted enough to be told about it. He was opening Pandora’s box.

“There’s something I need to tell you.”

Mizi and Sua are very similar, at least in the sense of their ways of interrogation, for she had been following Till for quite a while now, waiting for the right moment to ambush him.

The latter had been completely unaware of any stalking involving himself, so he just went about his way, remembering his fight with Ivan and changing his usual route to go to the library, but not before going back to his room to change his clothes.

A group of kids had been chasing him around, and he was so focused on running away from them that he tripped and fell onto the ground, dirtying his white cotton shirt.

Till never liked how dark the hallways could be, their grey-ish color emanating a sense of coldness, making him shiver all the way to his room.

Feeling the cold metal beneath his fingers, he turned the handle and opened the door, and just as he did, someone got on top of him in a piggyback carry, making both him and the person fall down to the ground in a loud thud.

As they regained their composure, massaging any place that had felt the pain of the fall, Till could realize who it was; he was honestly embarrassed about not realizing sooner.

“M-mizi!? What are you doing!?”

The pink-haired girl just stared at him, eyebrows furrowing and nose scrunching up. Her eyes were on the verge of tears; she wasn’t hurt, was she?

Till quickly rose to his feet, not knowing what had happened that made her cry or how to stop it.

“Did you get hurt? Are you okay?”

She was sobbing now, tears spilling fast down her face; she had difficulty breathing, and her face was as red as a tomato. She stared at Till as the tears fell from her eyes. She was angry and had no trouble letting him know, pushing his arm away from her.

“Am I okay? Am I okay!?!? Of course I’m not okay; my friends are acting so strange, and no one wants to tell me what is going on!” She was now pointing a finger at him, trying her best to express her emotions as more tears threatened to spill.

Till was paralyzed in place; his eyes widened at the sudden words. He had never seen Mizi like that, and he never wanted to see her in so much pain ever again. She didn't deserve to suffer.

"Hey, hey, it's okay. I'm okay." He tried his best to hold her, attempting to calm her down, but his words only made her even more angry.

"Liar! You're definitely not okay! You barely even talked to us all day!"

This is what he gets for trying to cover for Ivan; *he's going to pay.*

"Breathe, calm down, then we can talk." He was stalling; nothing about this conversation was appealing to him at all, but there was no escape in sight.

Her breaths slowly calmed down, occasionally shivering whenever she exhaled. Her face was still her, but her gaze was a serious one, she wanted answers, and she wanted them now.

"Talk."

"What."

Shock wasn't the right term for the emotion Sua was feeling; it was even more extreme. She had just been told that her friend, her brother, was going to die, and that he was okay with it.

Ivan's calm expression as he told her only made her more mad; how could he not care about his life?

"Yeah, sorry I kept it for so long." His smile was as big as ever, only now, the edges had begun to turn over, slowly revealing his true face.

The corners of his mouth tightened as his eyebrows furrowed; his eyes watered even though he tried his best to blink the tears away. Years and years of bottled up emotions threatened to spill, fighting their way up to be let out.

Ivan was strong, but even the toughest of diamonds can break.

Everything he had fought for so hard all these years to keep in came flooding out, angry for being held back, and they weren't leaving without a fight.

Violent sobs escaped from his lips as heavy tears spilled from his eyes. His chest tightened and turned within itself; he could feel the flower's stems as they prickled all around his lungs. Breathing had already been hard with his condition, but now that he was crying as well, it was almost impossible for him to let out even the tiniest breath.

His face turned all shades of red and violet; his breathing was blocked by the flowers in his throat, not letting air pass through. He reached his hands up to his neck, trying desperately to find even the smallest bit of space to be able to breathe again.

Sua was now panicking; it didn't help that she was just told he was going to die someday soon, and for all she knew, this could be that day.

She reached behind him and wrapped her arms around his chest, pushing and pulling him as much as she could to let the obstruction out of his body.

Ivan could feel her arm, but it hurt; it really hurt. He was only a few milliseconds away from fainting when he felt the flower move once more. It was only the second time a full flower grew inside of him, but the feeling was worse than ever.

The stem didn't have any thorns, but just having it be inside of him, something that was never meant to, made the already painful wounds in his throat open up once again, not before new ones were made as the flower fought its way up to his mouth.

He had begun to breathe, but only faintly, being given the slightest pockets of space to let air pass through until those were closed again, the cycle repeating every few seconds.

It took minutes before the full flower came out, getting stuck in his throat once it could already be seen out of his mouth, forcing him to keep it open. He slowly tugged at it, hoping to take it out himself, but even the slightest touch felt like a thousand new cuts had opened.

His dark-haired friend couldn't bear to see the sight of him; the sounds he was making were enough to drive her to the edge of throwing up, keeping herself together for his sake.

She was still behind him, so the image of the stuck flower hadn't entered her mind, but she still closed her eyes, not wanting to risk seeing anything unsightly.

Dry coughs echoed around the hallway, followed by choking produced by the vast amount of blood that the flower had trailed behind.

Ivan folded forward, accidentally pushing Sua aside, but he wasn't focused on her; the red flower had fallen to the ground with a loud splat, with what felt like a waterfall of blood falling soon after.

He tried to spit out any blood that was inside his mouth, but with each passing moment, it rose once again. He knew swallowing was a terrible idea, talking even more, but faced with Sua right in front of him, he saw the worry in her eyes. She was scared, terrified of what might happen to him.

"How long?"

Her voice was shaking, she didn't want to ask these questions, considering what had just happened, it would be better to let him rest and not speak at all; but she would have to suck it up if there would ever be a chance for her brother to be saved.

He was pained seeing her, watching her be so upset by something that had become the norm for him. His eyes couldn't stay still, shaking, making his vision blurry, his eyebrows furrowed, and that's when he felt it; a single drop, falling so fast he didn't even realize it was there in the first place.

There was no escaping from this now; he had dug himself deep into the ground, only for the dirt to trap him in, leaving him with enough space to die a slow and painful way.

The tears that had been welling up in his eyes started to come out; he fought to hold back the cries of the little boy buried deep inside him, but he was stronger; Ivan was only now realizing that he had always been so.

"So?"

She was getting impatient; slightly moving his gaze toward the clock behind her, Till saw that it had only been… *5 minutes!?* It had felt like an hour to him, dread lingering in the room, creeping closer and closer to him as each second passed.

"So.."

He tried his best to hold out as long as possible, at least until someone

called for him outside, or maybe even Ivan just casually coming in. But who was he kidding? He didn't really have any friends besides them, and even that was a stretch.

Sharp eyes pierced through him, waiting not so patiently for him to continue speaking. With a big sigh he knew he had to start talking. Slowly opening his mouth, slightly twitching, being filled with fear, he tried to begin “recounting” the events.

“Let’s just say Ivan and I got into a little argument.”

“That’s it?”

“Yep, that’s it.”

“Are you sure there’s nothing else?”

“Yep, 100%, nothing else.”

“Then why is your face so red?”

His hands shot up toward his face, feeling the heat from the blood rising to his cheeks.

“Aha! So there *is* something else! Just tell me!”

There really wasn’t any way to get anything past her, was there?

“Okay, *fine*, there is! But you *have* to promise to not tell anyone else, not Ivan, not Sua. Got it?”

Her eyes finally lit up, she understood he was now telling the truth and was determined to get the information out of him, at any cost.

“Yes, I won’t tell a soul; just tell me!”

And even though it was the last thing he wanted to do, all his attempts at avoiding it had completely failed; she wouldn’t accept anything but the truth.

“Something happened with Ivan years ago.”

Suddenly, all his thoughts from the day before started coming out; this was the first time he ever told anyone about him and Ivan leaving Anakt. He told her about his guilt, how he could barely look at him in the eyes without feeling an immense amount of shame, cursing himself as each word came out.

“I shouldn’t have done that; he came back for me, and now we’re stuck here.”

Mizi could barely keep up with the information that was being given to her; so many things had happened that she had never known about. She thought the other two were oblivious to Till’s behavior, but in reality it had been *her* who hadn’t paid attention to either of them.

“He should hate me, really, I would if I were him. I don’t get why he’s so friendly to me after what I did to him.” He had dropped his head to his hands, resting his forehead on calloused fingers.

“Because he *cares* about you.” Even though she didn’t say the exact words, they both knew she interrupted him to say the most important thing he had to hear: Ivan would never hate him, because he loves him.

He placed his hands on his head, leaning back onto the floor, attempting to hide his reddened face.

“D-don’t say it like *that*.” He was embarrassed at just the thought; could he really? If so, then what about him?

He closed his eyes and felt her move beside him; they were both now resting on the floor, unsure of what to say.

“I’m going to apologize to him; he deserves it.”

He turned his head to look at her, finding that she had already been looking at him. Her eyes were determined.

“I’m going to help you.” He could finally be let go of all the guilt he carried, and there was no one else he would want help from but Mizi.

And without warning, her arm quickly enveloped him in a tight embrace. She nuzzled her face onto his neck and wrapped him tightly, not letting him go anywhere.

He was startled but eventually reciprocated the hug. With Mizi’s help, was going to be okay; he would be able to apologize and the four of them could be as they always should have been: happy.

“What do you mean you don’t know!?”

There really wasn’t a deadline that Ivan was trying to reach; he only knew the clock was ticking, and with each movement of the hand, the

flowers grew bigger and bigger.

“There genuinely isn’t a way to know how long; for all I know, the next time I see him could be the last.”

Oh *shit*.

He wasn’t meant to say that.

“What do you mean by *him*?” All the carefulness she once held for him faded away as she realized there was more she wasn’t told about.

“Ah, no, it’s nothing.” He tried to act as if he hadn’t said anything, but the damage had been done; there really wasn’t anything he could hide now.

Ivan never wanted to go into the details of his disease, so he had only told her what it overall meant and did to him, never the why. But if anyone was going to pry that information out of him, it would be Sua.

“This is Till’s fault, isn’t it?”

She always hit the nail on the dot. And Ivan, who had just about started to relax, quickly tensed up again, unable to suppress his bloodied coughs.

“Shit! Sorry, I won’t say his name again.”

“How do you even know it’s about him?” He was truly curious, he never mentioned that the disease was caused by unrequited love, so how would she know it was the cause of another person?

“You’re not the only one who reads, you know? You just never saw me ‘cause I always sit at the back.”

“Oh, right.”

The pair stood awkwardly, not knowing what else to do or talk about, years of hidden truths revealed in the span of a few minutes, they both needed some time to take it in.

“You know there’s a cure, right?”

They weren’t looking at each other, but they could feel the tension in the air as the word ‘cure’ was spoken.

“Yeah.” He turned his face away, filling with shame, already knowing

the sentence that would be uttered by her.

“So, why don’t you get the surgery?”

His head dropped as a sigh left his lips; he knew the answer would make her mad, but if she was asking, he would respond.

“I don’t want to forget him.”

She understood where he came from, but even this was an extreme.

“That doesn’t matter—”

“Imagine you’re on the stage against Mizi, only one can win; would you let her?”

He cut her off, not wanting to be scolded for his decision. There was nothing she could say that would make him change his mind.

“What?”

“If you had to die in order for Mizi to live, would you sacrifice yourself?”

“That has nothing to do with this! Till won’t die if you get the surgery.”

“But to me he will.”

That was all he needed to say for Sua to understand. She couldn’t live in a world without Mizi, and so couldn’t Ivan with Till. Just the thought of forgetting her made her sick, and this is what he had to deal with all this time.

“Even if you did sacrifice yourself, you’d be the trauma plaguing Mizi’s life. That’s the difference between you and me; your death would break her.”

As the words came out of his mouth, he instantly regretted them; he never meant to go this far to prove his point, and her watering eyes would only pain him more.

“But then, what about you? Won’t you also plague his life after your death?”

“I don’t think so. I believe my death wouldn’t affect him as much. After all, Mizi loves you, but Till loves Mizi. So no, I wouldn’t.”

Sua doesn’t know what to say; he was ultimately right, but there was no way she was going to let his brother slowly kill himself for someone that didn’t love him as he did.

A short moment of silence passed before Sua spoke again.

“You have to get the surgery, even if you forget him.”

Having spoken her mind, she quickly left, with no bearing to think about this any more. And Ivan stood there, once again, knowing it was already too late for him, and she would never know it.

Chapter End Notes

> ALSO did you guys watch wiege???? It was so sad omgg won't say any spoilers, but if you haven't watched it then do!!

Chapter 7: Realize

Chapter Notes

> Hey guys.. I'm alive ^^ Sorry for disappearing for soo long, I might take a little break 'cuz exams start in two weeks but after that I'll do my best to keep updating!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You have to get the surgery, even if you forget him.”

Having spoken her mind, she quickly left, with no bearing to think about this any more. And Ivan stood there, once again, knowing it was already too late for him, and she would never know it.

“Hey! Are you even listening?”

Mizi’s voice echoed through his room, breaking a silence Till hadn’t realized was there. It wasn’t the first time that she caught him dozing off; it had happened quite a few times already, forcing her to resort to loud noises to catch his attention.

“What are you planning on telling him?”

It was the perfect question for their current situation, but it still caught him off guard; he hadn’t actually put as much thought into this as he had previously thought. Thinking it over, he wondered whether it was actually a good idea to do this; things had been somewhat normal, and who knows, him bringing up the subject might only make things worse.

Was Ivan’s behavior his way of saying that he didn’t want to talk about or even remember it? Is what he did irreversible, and there’s no way to be normal around him anymore?

“Till! Am I talking to a wall? Say something!”

Her palms clashed together right in front of Till’s face; he had now pulled her last string, annoyance riling her up enough to shout at him. He had no clue how much time he had left her talking by herself, and he was starting to feel bad.

"Sorry... I guess I kind of... doze… off?"

“You think!? Come on! What’s going on? You were so eager to apologize to Ivan; what happened?”

Right, apologize to Ivan..

"Mizi...” Till turned his head; he knew why, but he didn’t want to acknowledge it—he was ashamed. Ashamed at himself for what he was about to say, he sure as hell didn’t want to look her in the eyes when he said it. “I don’t actually think it’s a good idea anymore…”

She was now truly mad. Was he actually serious? She hadn’t gone through all the trouble of figuring out what was wrong only for her friend to suddenly decide it wasn’t worth it.

“What are you talking about, Till!? Are you just chickening out!?”

He didn’t have to look at her to know how angry she was; he knew she cared deeply about her friends, so hearing him say that was like hearing that one of the most important people in her life was just giving up on the other. Her heart ached like shattered glass, fragile and fragmented by his wavering resolve.

“It’s not anything like that! I was just thinking… Does Ivan even want an apology?”

His words reached her as an even bigger shock. It was as if Till had undergone a sudden transformation; his reluctance to proceed marked a stark departure from his usual decisive demeanor. Just a few minutes ago he was so relieved to finally find a solution, and now he was just throwing it away?

“Are you serious?”

She lowered her head, long pink-blue hair falling over, covering her face. Was it just Till, or had the whole vibe in the room changed? He could feel himself get goosebumps just by looking at her; he had never seen her act like that.

"W-what?”His voice climbed a few octaves as he answered her.

“You heard me. Are you seriously considering not doing it anymore?”

"Um..." He had no clue what to say next; he didn't want to lie, but he didn't want to risk getting murdered in his sleep anytime soon.

"So are you giving up? Do you not care about Ivan anymore?"

"Whoa, what!? I never said that!"

"You basically did."

Till is an idiot, and he knew it. How had he not realized that the reason she covered her face with her hair was to hide the tears that were slowly coming out of her innocent eyes? He had done a lot of fucking-up recently.

He averted his gaze, pretending not to notice, before exhaling a deep sigh as he continued to justify his stance, his shoulders slumping in defeat. "I mean, think about it, if he really wanted to talk about it, wouldn't he have said something after all these years?"

Mizi raised her head, showing her reddened face and watery cheeks. Her eyes opened wide as she did, realizing something.

"He's probably just pretending to like me so that you guys don't suspect anything; he has probably hated me since that day." And realizing this, he felt his whole body lose strength. When faced with this reality, he felt a pit grow at the bottom of his stomach, dropping lower the more he dwelled on the matter.

Till looked up after feeling a hand land on his shoulder, his green eyes meeting her yellow ones. He couldn't place it, but the look she gave him twisted his stomach so much it actually hurt; she was *pitying* him.

"Till... do you really believe that?" Her voice was filled with worry, cracking due to her previous crying, new tears threatening to spill as they looked at each other.

Don't look at me like that..

"You don't? It's what makes the most sense, really."

Before Till could react, his head was forcefully turned 90 degrees, a burning sensation coming from the side of it. Mizi had just slapped him. It took him a few seconds to realize what had happened and take a hand to rub his cheek, only to feel… water?

Am I really crying?

“Stop talking like that! I hate it when you say things like that! For once in your life, can’t you open your eyes and see how Ivan feels about you!? How are you the only person that doesn’t see it!?”

It wasn’t until he remembered something that Mizi said, something very important, that he truly understood how she was feeling. She had said that Ivan *cares* about him; even after all they’ve been through, he still cared, and it was about time that Till showed it too.

“Do you really want me to spell it out for you!?”

He raised his hand and gently rested it on her head. “I’m sorry, Mizi.” After locking eyes with her, he gave her a smile. “I get it now. I’m sorry for worrying you.”

“Okay, but since I’m seeing you’re having trouble with realizing emotions, let me tell you, you also care about him.” Her eyes were gleaming in perseverance; she had never hesitated to lend a hand in times of need, always ready to offer support and guidance to her friends.

Till wiped his tears as he awkwardly laughed. “W-why do you have to say it like *that*?”

“I think you know why.”

What is she talking about? Of course I care about him; he’s my friend, right?

A confused expression was plastered onto his face. “Well, I can’t just do everything for you.” She said as she crossed her arms and rolled her eyes.

“Come on, please! I really have no clue what you’re talking about, just this one time!” He pleaded with her, but she just raised an eyebrow in response. “Okay, maybe not just this once, but please! You always say such weird things when we talk about Ivan; I can never understand you.”

A low sigh left her mouth as she looked down to the floor. *Am I really considering this?* “I’ll just say this: whenever we talk about Ivan, you

get this look in your eyes. I can't ever decipher what to make of it; I just know it's different."

"What?"

She shrugged, lifting her arms. "Hey, you asked; I'm just the messenger delivering the juicy details." Till's face contorted as he tried to make something out of what she just told him. "That answer doesn't make any sense!"

And they hadn't realized it up until now, but it had been a very long time since they had any actual fun together. Genuine laughter sounded through the room after what had felt like years, and Mizi was happy; they were all finally going to be together again, just like they were meant to.

"Okay, okay, let's just remember why we're here." She tried her best to get her serious face back on, but her reddened face and the giggles escaping from her mouth weren't helping her.

He loved that about her, her childish, lovable side, but things were different now; he knew things were about to change, and if everything went well, for the better.

"Well, we have to start thinking of ideas."

"I mean, if you're going to go all paranoid on him, then we *really* have to plan."

"Forget I said anything. It won't happen, okay? That was just a one-time thing."

"Suure."

Mizi scattered around looking for… something? She always acted before she spoke, so it was anybody's guess what she was trying to find.

"Aha! Found them!"

"What are you…" The words trailed off before he could finish as she laid the items she gathered on the ground before them. "Well, we need to hatch a plan, right?"

Just what is she up to?

"Right..." Till focused on the blank sheet of paper and colored crayons in front of him. Was her plan to draw a… plan?

Mizi grabbed the red crayon and started to draw something that faintly resembled… a triangle and a box? Maybe he should be the one drawing…

She finished her "drawing" and moved over to the green pencil… Oh… no...

"Hey, Mizi… Is it really necessary to draw it out?" He pointed at the drawing she had made, too scared to call them something they weren't and crush Mizi's creative spirit.

"Shh! Just wait a second…" She was so focused on getting everything exactly how she imagined it that she barely paid attention to him.

"Finee."

Ivan wasn't always the type to compose songs; that was Till's thing, but somehow, after living how he was for all those years, he finally picked up the habit. He guessed it would be easier to write a song for Till, rather than actually have to tell him how he felt; in all likelihood, he wouldn't even care.

Coughs escaped his mouth as he looked for something to write in; a blank music sheet would work. He had no clue how to start, but he felt like it was the last thing he could do to feel closer to Till.

Finally finding a few sheets of paper, he grabbed a pencil and went outside; he had initially wanted to do it in the library, but it was far too easy of a spot to be found, so of course, as always, he went to sit by a tree, far, far away.

How would he even start? Was there some sort of routine he had to follow? Either way, there was no chance in hell he was going to ask the only person he knew that composed songs how he did it.

After sitting down on the ground looking over the fake landscape, he remembered the only thing he was trying to avoid. The meteors lighting up the night sky, the feeling of the cold green grass below his bare feet, and the hand of the person he loved most pulling away.

He's kidding, right? There was no way that doing this would prove beneficial to his condition, the tightening in his chest only confirming this. Sua was definitely going to kill him.

If I don't die first, that is.

When you know for years that you're going to die, it turns into a big sick joke that no one laughs at but you.

Luckily, he had brought some tissues; he didn't want to dirty his work, and it was guaranteed that something would happen. He knew the disease acted erratically; it was a line that slowly went up, but it had its ups and downs during that climb. He just hoped the next one was a down.

He missed the times when he didn't have to worry about just thinking about someone, even if he couldn't remember them anymore, because even before he contracted his illness, Till would only look at *her*.

That was the reality of his situation, and though this wasn't the first time he thought about it—of course it wasn't—this *was* the first time he wanted to write about it. Maybe the reason Till was able to write so many songs and draw so many portraits was because of his emotions.

This was going to be easier than Ivan had initially thought, because even though he wasn't the emotional type, only he knew how it felt, how *he* felt. The words started coming to him as soon as he realized it.

He placed every thought into that piece of paper, ignoring the feeling of the flowers making their way up his throat. No, they're not even there; don't even think about the sharp edges of the leaves attached to the excruciatingly painful stem; you're just imagining it.

He grabbed a tissue and placed it on his mouth, preparing for the inevitable release of a mixture of things he was too used to. Dropping the music sheet, he latched his other hand to his lips, trying his best to suppress the coughs scraping at his throat.

His pulse quickened as he heard the sound of grass shuffling under feet; someone was coming. It didn't take more than a few seconds for him to hide the tissue and painstakingly swallow down the flowers inside him, although his breathing had become a little compromised.

As the steps inched closer and closer to him, he hurried to fold and hide his music sheet. It really was just a way for him to express his feelings, so he surely didn't want anyone snooping through his mind, trying to decipher what the song "meant."

But the other person was too fast, sitting beside him and looking at him with a confused face. "What've you got there?"

Ivan quickly hid the paper behind his back, trying desperately but failing miserably at feigning innocence. Sweat dripped from his forehead, calling him out on his lie.

"Let me see!" Till tried his best to grab whatever it was Ivan was hiding; it was pretty odd for him, but that only made him more interested in what it was.

"See what? There's n-nothing here!" Ivan moved his body according to Till's; there was not a chance he was going to let him of all people see it, at least not yet.

"Just show me!"

"I-I don't know what you're talking about!"

Arms were flailing and hands were clenching as each side tried to reach their goal. It wasn't until Ivan was about to fall that he separated his hands and grabbed at the ground to support himself, landing flat on his back.

Because of wanting to reach what Ivan was hiding, Till mimicked his movements, leading him to also begin to fall. His face was inches from the ground before he caught himself with his hands, knees falling to the ground with them.

After recovering from the fall, Ivan realized the position they were now in. Till was practically pinning him to the ground, and the possibilities of what could happen next spiraled in both their minds, turning their faces into a blushing mess.

They were both breathing heavily, and the flowers riddling Ivan's lungs seemed to magically disappear. All the moving had tired him, but just for a moment, he could finally breathe freely again.

His gaze unconsciously made its way to Till's lips, recalling the time he had asked for them to touch each other's lips, only to be turned down immediately; maybe today could be his birthday.

He wasn't the only one thinking this; while Ivan was stuck in his memories, Till was remembering the exact same instance. Something within him was making him imagine things he never thought he would: caressing Ivan's face, ruffling his hands through his hair, kissing his lips—

Their hearts beat rapidly, shortening their breaths; they were stuck in place, too focused on their own thoughts to remember the position they were in, minds racing with endless possibilities.

It was then when Ivan felt his empty hand. Shit, the music sheet! He didn't have it anymore. He quickly stood up, knocking Till off his balance, and desperately looked around in search of it.

Till just sat there, trying to piece his mind together to understand what had just happened. Was he really thinking of—

His thoughts were disrupted by the scene in front of him. Ivan was frantically moving around looking for something, most probably what he was trying to hide.

"H-hey, uh… what are you looking for?" Till swallowed hard, trying his best to not sound flustered at all, and he knew he was because of the heat he felt on his face,
not daring to confirm it by asking Ivan.

When Ivan heard him, he quickly turned around and hid both his arms behind his back. "W-what are you talking about? I'm not looking for anything…"

There was no fooling Till; he could clearly tell that Ivan was lying, and terribly so. It wouldn't take much convincing for him to reveal his secret, but now he wanted to see how much time it would take for him to surrender and tell Till by his own volition.

"Oh well, I guess you don't!" He stood up and sat beside where Ivan was sitting before, motioning the latter to sit next to him.

Ivan was a bit taken aback; it was so out of character for Till to just drop a subject like this. Was it because of what just happened? He

cautiously made his way over, sitting beside him, music sheet crumpled inside the fist behind his back.

Okay, Till may have just said he would wait for Ivan, but now that the opportunity presented itself, there was no way he wasn't going to take advantage of it. He waited until he lowered his guard, and before he could realize it, Till had swiftly taken his wrist and his hand open, taking the paper inside it.

"Hey! What are you—"

Till quickly placed a finger to his mouth, making a shushing sound before beginning to open the piece of paper, strategically doing it as far as possible from Ivan so as to not let him grab it.

"D-don't open that! Give it back!" He tried his best to reach it but was ultimately stopped by Till's hand, pushing him back. "No can do, pretty boy; I've got to see what you're hiding so strongly."

Pretty… boy?

Being stuck in his thoughts, Ivan didn't notice when Till had finally managed to get the paper open, intently studying its contents, brows furrowing and eyes widening more and more with each line he read.

Ivan forcefully grabbed the paper from Till's hands, but it was too late; he had read everything, every piece of him, his emotions, his feelings—he had read them all, and there was no way he wouldn't realize it was about him. I mean, yeah, it was meant to be a song for Till, but that doesn't mean he was ready to share it with him yet.

"Ivan... is that—" Before he could finish his sentence, Ivan had already stood up, slowly walking away. "Hey! Don't go, I just want to ask you something!" But there was nothing that was going to stop him, at least not words.

Till stood up as well and began chasing him, shouting his name, hoping he would turn around. *Shit, shit, shit, this isn't how it was meant to go at all.* He was finally able to catch up to him and grab his wrist, stopping him. Ivan stood in place, slowly turning around to shake Till's hand off of him.

"What do you want to ask?" His face was turned toward Till, but his eyes were fixated on the ground, blinking rapidly to keep tears from

falling. “It’s just—are you—have you been practicing in secret?”

At this, Ivan’s eyes widened with shock; he finally looked up and saw how awkward Till was acting. “I mean, if you haven't, it’s *really* good.” Ivan’s heart skipped a beat; *the* music prodigy was complimenting *him*? Blood rose to his face for the umpteenth time, and he instantly became a flustered mess.

Wait… Did he… not realize?

“What, you gonna keep staring—”

“You really think so?” He cut Till off because, for the first time in forever, he felt happy and free. He couldn’t contain his happiness and lunged towards him, causing both of them to lose their balance.

“H-hey! Get off!” But Ivan wouldn’t budge; he was overjoyed, and nothing was going to change that. He was going to be smiling for weeks, if not months.

“What do you like the most? What chords do you think can go with this? What can I name it? Do you have any tips? Do you actually like it, or did you just lie for my sake?” A wave of questions exploded from Ivan; he was just excited to take advantage of this opportunity.

“Whoa! Calm down… And yeah, I did actually like it; I wouldn’t lie about things like that.” He was overwhelmed by all the questions thrown at him, only barely registering the last one. “Anyhow, since when do you write songs?”

Ivan was finally getting off of Till, scurrying back to sit at his usual spot. “What do you think I should name it?”

“Uhh, I don’t know, it’s your song. Are you not going to answer?” He really didn’t want to. I mean, how was he supposed to tell him that he thought about him every day while suffering with flowers growing inside of him? There was just no way he could.

“I don’t know… just... got the... vibes?”

“Oh, I get that.”

He did!?

“I just wanted to try something new.”

His face was turned elsewhere, but Till could still see the redness in Ivan’s ears as he spoke. “It’ll probably be a one-time thing; I just wanted to see what it was like.”

“Hey, don't say that! It’s really good, honest. You should make another one!”

Yeah..

He turned back to look at Till, and that’s when he saw it: little drops of water coming from his eyes. He really was a walking curse, making everyone around him cry.

He looked back to the ground, bringing up his hands to his eyes, trying to wipe the tears away.

“Thank you, Till, it means a lot.” He managed to get the words out in-between sniffles. Never once had he cried in front of someone else, but this new sense of relief had made his emotions go haywire.

Whoa, did his heart just skip a beat, or was he having a stroke? Till didn’t know why, but seeing Ivan like this, vulnerable, pouring his heart out to him, made his heartbeats quicken and his palms sweaty.

Oh.

Oh.

Realization hit him like a bullet. How could he be so oblivious? Mizi was saying so right in his face, and it took him this long to finally figure it out. There was no confirmation that Mizi had known about Till liking her, but in this moment, he recognized what was happening to him; he finally realized he *like* liked Ivan. It was about time that he did; no wonder everything felt out of place for him. It was because things *had* changed; he was just the last one to notice.

He inched closer to Ivan, placing a hand on his chin to make him turn his way. With his spare hand he grazed Ivan’s cheek, using his thumb to wipe the tears away.
Ivan was frozen in place; he had no clue what was happening or what to do. He could only just stare at Till, too afraid that moving would end this moment.

They stayed there for a while, staring into each other's eyes, until Till finally responded to him. "Y-you're welcome." He freaked out about what he was doing and fell backwards, hitting his head in the process.

It took a few seconds for Ivan to come back to reality and realize that Till had fallen. "Whoa! Are you okay!?" He placed his hand in front of him and waited till the boy took it to lift him up.

"Yup, I'm fine." He pressed his hand on his head to check for any injuries.

That's definitely going to leave a bump.

"Do you need an ice pack? Should I call for help?"

"Calm down, it was just a short fall, nothing to worry about."

Ivan wasn't listening anymore; he was more focused on the piece of paper that had fallen out of Till's pocket during the fall. It was folded in half; he couldn't see what was inside it, so he took the opportunity to get back at him.

While Till wasn't looking, he swiftly grabbed the paper and ran a few steps back to not let him snatch it from his hands. "Let's see what we've got here…"

"What are you—"

Ivan dodged Till as he was trying to get the paper back, opening it before he had a chance. "Aww, too bad, there's nothing here." Well, it wasn't exactly blank either; he had drawn the lines for a music sheet, only there weren't any actual notes yet.

Till swiped the sheet from his hands, quickly putting it back in his pocket. "Why hide it if there's nothing on it?" Ivan had put his innocent eyes on, slowly making his way toward him.

"I'm not hiding it…"

"Suure, is it going to be about Mizi too~?"

"What?"

“The song, is it gonna be about Mizi?”

Okay, so he hadn’t been the only one who didn’t realize how he felt; apparently Ivan was as obtuse as he was. Honestly, this kid was going to be the death of him one day.

"Um... no, actually.”

Ivan was actually shocked because anything and everything Till had ever written was about her, so this made no sense at all. If he was writing another song, what else could it be about?

“What!?”

“Yeah, I just… I don’t know... I guess... I don’t… like her anymore?”

He was looking to the side, hand behind his neck; he was always embarrassed when talking about his feelings. Ivan’s jaw was wide open; he was absolutely flabbergasted. Was today opposite day?

“Don’t look at me like that! Feelings can change, y'know.” But nothing was going to wipe the surprise from his face. Wait, if he doesn’t like her anymore, and the song won’t be about her, does Till like someone else?

“Whoa, okay, I just need a few minutes to take it all in.”

“What are you talking about!? Don’t be dramatic! It’s just a song, okay!?”

Till punched him in the arm as they both started to laugh. Slowly but surely, they laid back on the floor, staring up at the clouds, calming their breaths down.

“It’s never *just* a song. If it’s not about Mizi, you *have* to tell me who it’s about!”

“It doesn’t have to be about someone!”

“Come on~ it’s *always* about someone, just tell me!”

In truth, Till hadn’t written anything in a while; whenever he tried to, he blanked out, but now, faced with this new reality, he was filled

with the urge to compose entire symphonies for *him*.

“You’re so red! Of course it’s gonna be about someone! Tell me who you like~”

“You’re so annoying, bug off!”

“Ooooh, Till's got a crush~ Who's the lucky one, huh?”

He could do nothing but sulk and sit in silence, praying for this ridicule to end. There was no way he could tell him who; what if he didn’t like him back? Would he be disgusted by him? What if he hates him after? He wouldn’t risk it, not now.

But of course, Ivan wasn’t leaving any time soon; he was circling around Till and poking him, pestering him, trying to get a reaction out of him. Once Ivan decided on something, it was almost impossible to change his mind.

“Ok! Fine! I’ll just tell you one thing.”

“What! What! Tell meee.”

With the look Ivan was giving him, Till knew he would definitely regret this, but if it was the only way for Ivan to shut up, he had to say something.

"It's... a boy.”

Ivan didn’t know how to react. Should he be excited that the boy could be him? Or should he be sad that Till likes someone else? The latter was most probable; he didn’t have many friends, but it could always be someone he doesn’t talk to, and the chance of it being him was far too little for it to actually be.

“Oh..”

He didn’t know what to say; maybe today was just an exception to his illness, but it really felt soul-crushing to have his freedom snatched away from him for the
second time.

The silence that now surrounded them was what made Till remember why he was there in the first place.

Till had somehow managed to get the crayons from Mizi and draw the faces himself. "Okay, so, what do you have in mind?" After a long time, they were finally discussing the actual apology. No more self-pity over here, no sir.

“Well, last time I checked, you were the one apologizing.” Okay, maybe she was a bit pissy about the crayons. “But you’re going to help me, right, Awesome Amazing Super Mega Cool Lovable Mizi?”

"Well... if you put it like that…” She was just teasing him, but at this point he was really desperate. They both longed for the carefree days of childhood, free from fights or misunderstandings, just being friends again, all together.

“Well, step one is finding him; he can really disappear whenever he wants to. And step two is…”

“Apologize?”

“Yeah! There, we’re finished. Nice chat.” He was just beginning to stand up when Mizi grabbed his wrist and pulled him back down. She had that look in her eyes again… Maybe it wasn’t wise to make jokes right now..

“Okay, since I’m seeing you have no clue how to start, I’ll give you a little help.” Now we’re getting somewhere. She knew how to act in these types of situations better than he ever would.

“What I'm thinking is that you go and find him, make sure there’s nothing that could distract you from the subject, and if there is, just tell him you want to talk to him somewhere else. Next, when you’re alone, you can start by saying you want to apologize. He might be surprised or maybe even try to change the subject; don’t let him.

Tell him why you’re sorry, not just that you are. You have to express your emotions and make him understand that you really regret it; you just have to be honest. It’s not quantum physics.”

“Quantum what?”

“Never mind. Just remember, do not get distracted; the sooner you apologize, the better.”

“Don't worry, I won’t. Just to recap, I take him to a private place or somewhere where no one can distract us, say I want to apologize, and just be honest.”

“You got it! Now go get him, cowboy!”

“Cowboy?”

“Just go!”

"Hey, man—”

“I have to go.”

He quickly stood up and turned away from him; he wanted to run but knew damn well that if he did, it wouldn’t turn out well. He didn’t realize that his knuckles had gone white from clenching his fists, or how his nails were pressing against his palm; he couldn’t feel anything but the blossoming pain growing in his lungs.

It wasn’t typical of Ivan to forget such an important thing as his disease; he may have been relieved of it for just a few moments, but if the tightening in his chest was any indicator, it’s not going to disappear completely anytime soon.

“Hey! Wait! Don’t go!”

Till hurried to grab Ivan’s wrist; all he could do was stand in place. He didn’t want to turn around; no, he *couldn’t* turn around. He knew what the consequences of that would be, and he really, *really* did not want to go through it again, not right now.

His touch eased the tension in his hand, the coolness of his skin bringing a soothing sensation to his burdened chest. But his heart was beating too fast; he couldn’t keep up. The calming sensation lasted for a moment before his hands started shaking, cold sweat enveloping his body.

“You don’t have to turn around. I just… wanted to apologize.”

What?

“I know it was a really long time ago, but I never gave you the apology you deserved.”

What are you talking about?

“I shouldn’t have done what I did; if we had gone, maybe by now we would all be away, having fun somewhere else. I just *had* to screw it up.”

“Till-”

"Just let me speak, please. I really am sorry, and if I could go back, I’d do it differently. You did all of that for me, and I threw it away. I didn’t have the right to. I know it’s been years, and it’s probably too late to say sorry, but I was a coward. I didn’t want to face the truth, even so that doesn’t excuse what I did.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I don’t know how you did it, but maybe we can try again? Look for a way out? I really want to… see the sky again.”

If Till didn’t know any better, he would point out how Ivan was crying, but now was not the time. He didn’t need to see his face to know how he felt; the shaky, tight hold on his hand told him everything he needed to know. He just wished to finally get a response.

“You don’t have to say anything right now; I just knew that the sooner I did this, the better.”

Ivan sniffled his cries before turning around, still wiping the tears away. Till’s face was filled with worry, his eyebrows were furrowed, and his lips were pressed tight together; oh, how Ivan wanted to graze his hand along his face and make all his worries go away. Doing that might mean a death sentence, but he was never the type to “fight for his life."

“Don’t look at me like—”

“Shh.”

Ivan used the hand Till wasn’t holding and placed it on his cheek, returning the favor and wiping his tears away. Till hadn't noticed the tears falling from his eyes until they were wiped away.

“It’s okay, you don’t have to apologize; it was a long time ago.”

“But I do—”

“Hey, I forgive you; you don’t have to worry about it.”

“But–”

“Okay?”

“Okay..”

“Good, now, let’s head back; it’s almost curfew.”

Ivan’s hand had dropped from his face, but Till couldn’t keep himself from staring at him. Was it really okay? Would things finally go back to normal? He didn’t want to get ahead of himself, but just the possibility of finally leaving with Mizi, with Sua, and with *Ivan* made him smile like a baby.

“Okay, let’s go.”

With a smile and a wave, they said their goodnights, and he closed the door, locking it as he turned around, letting himself slide down on it to the floor; his hands moved to his chest, pulling at his clothes, hoping that it would let him breathe, but of course it didn't; it never did.

Desperate searches for breaths did their best to reach his lungs, but the attempt was futile. His throat was being blocked by his worst enemy, so if he wanted to breathe, he had to take it out.

His vision was getting blurry and his fingers were starting to feel numb, but he felt it; the flower was right at the base of his tongue, and there was only one thing he had to do to free his airways. It wasn’t going to be pretty, but at this point cleaning blood was routine for him.

He groggily moved his hands towards his mouth, closing his eyes in anticipation of the mountains of pain he would be feeling shortly; he would normally take a few deep breaths to calm himself down, but aside from the fact that he literally couldn’t, he had to take it out quickly.

With his mouth open as wide as possible, he placed three fingers inside, trying to reach as far as possible to grab the flower and pull it out. The feeling was disgusting, but still, he kept going until the ends of his fingers touched the tip of a flower petal, and by forcing his arm back, he could finally grab it.

He pulled as hard as he possibly could; tears leaked through his eyelids as the stem scraped against the wall of his throat. Pulling even harder, he could feel the cuts burning him from the inside; his whole body was shaking, but it was at this point that it was close enough to let air through, and even if it hurts, it's all he has at the moment.

His breaths were shaky with drops of blood dripping from his lips, his body was cold, and his eyes were rolling back, but he was almost done. After taking a break, he continued with the dreadful pain and took one last pull to yank the flower out of him, finally letting him breathe freely.

He wheezed and coughed until the blood started to drown him; the metallic taste was awful. He turned his head down to let the blood fall by itself, splatters of crimson cascading onto the porcelain white floor.

Despite his blurred vision and feeble limbs, he made a valiant effort to rise, only to find his knees giving way as the room spun around him. His eyes rolled back as his eyelids slowly shut, arms falling to the floor along with his body. His head was still spinning as his thoughts fell quieter, the last thing he could remember before passing out being his chest moving, taking slow and steady breaths.

Chapter End Notes

> Wanted to write a little more fluff in there for you guys, hope you liked the chapter! ;)

Chapter 8: Shooting Stars

Chapter Notes

> Guys I am so so so sorry for keeping you waiting for so long, I totally didn't plan ahead and forgot that I only have time to write on vacations. After so much waiting here it is! The final chapter! I hope you guys enjoy reading it as much as I did writing it, no promises though :)
> Also now that Alien Stage is finished I do not want to go back and read the past chapters and see how bad I mischaracterized them. And Scars???? Oh my god??? What the hell Vivinos. Ivan is alive, trust. She don't know what she talking 'bout.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Till lay awake staring blankly at his ceiling; he turned on his side to look at the clock for the fifth time in what felt like hours. *2:40 AM* . He had been trying to sleep, but there was something gnawing at him —or someone—making him unable to. His body was shivering even though he was hot, the blanket having already been thrown to the floor long ago; he was sweating even though the air conditioning was on. Needless to say, he was restless.

He tugged at his clothes, moving them away from his skin; the sweat had begun making everything stick to him, and the sensation of wet hair and clothes made him crave the cold air he couldn't feel.

Why couldn't he sleep? What was keeping him awake this late at night? He was worn out, and all the thoughts racing in his mind weren't helpful. His heartbeat quickened whenever he pictured that idiot smiling at him and the sharp fang that he just couldn't seem to get away from—not that he even wanted to.

He couldn't take it anymore, quickly getting up and going to the bathroom, taking his shirt off. The heat was too much; his face flushed at all the images that were coming to his mind. Ivan, sitting in the shade of a tree, hiding from the scorching sun, sweat dripping from his body making his clothes look tighter than normal—

Till quickly splashed his face with cold water, begging his mind to stop. But the cooling effect only lasted a few seconds before he was back to sweating. It was very late at night, basically morning, but he knew that if he wanted to sleep, he had to go back to normal.

Cold water hit the white tiles as he started taking off his clothes, leaving them on the ground before entering the shower. His body cooled down, but his mind was an unstoppable force, spiraling with even more possibilities against Till's wishes. *Why* did he have to like that loser? Why couldn't he have just kept liking Mizi? He never had these kinds of thoughts before, and he didn't like what they were doing to his body.

He had to physically grab his face and shut his eyes closed just to not look down and see something he didn't want to; he now realized that closing his eyes didn't help at all but in fact only caused it to be worse. He couldn't stop picturing Ivan on top of him, his hands locked in place on the ground, deep black eyes staring back at him, beautiful eyes—no *! No! Stop it! Just think about closing your eyes and going to sleep—yes, sleep—in my soft bed, next to Iv—*

Okay, it was getting serious; he had never pulled an all-nighter, but there's always a first time for everything, right? He turned the water off and grabbed a towel to dry himself; he wasn't sweating anymore, but the pressing issue remained.

Fine, brain, you win! I'll think about Ivan so hard you won't have anything left to think about! Yeah, that'll show it.

Putting on a clean pair of clothes, he made his way back to his bed, looking at the mess he made during his distress. He wasn't fond of sleeping in sweaty bedsheets, but at this hour he wasn't going to go looking for any fresh ones.

In a desperate effort to go back to sleep, he tried recounting all the memories he had of Ivan, seeming as if that was the only thing keeping him awake now. The first one that came to mind was when they first met; he had just been sold off, and as they were taking him away, he got a glimpse of a little Ivan. His eyes looked empty, and that intrigued him in some way; they were only children, though.

Taking control of his thoughts really did help, but even as he repeated his most recent memories of him—many times—he felt like he was forgetting something. Maybe it was something recent? He recounted all the interactions he has had with him in the last few days: singing a song for him, Mizi looking for him, their fight at the library, finding him composing a song, apologizing to him—

Wait, that's right! How could he forget something that has been killing him with guilt for so long? Did apologizing just mean everything was

automatically better? No, of course not; he knew better than that, but after dwelling on that day for so long, he still felt like there was something he wasn't remembering.

As painful as it was, if recalling that night once more was going to let him sleep, he would do it a thousand times. He tried remembering any new information, but his mind went blank when trying to fill in spots.

First they escaped from Anakt and were running away, then he remembered Mizi, and since he didn't want to leave her, he turned back; after getting back to the garden, he turned around and saw that Ivan wasn't there, so he sat beside the exit and waited for him; after that, everything is a blur. He doesn't remember what happened after he woke up. Yeah, they went back inside, but that was about it.

He tried his best to picture himself on that day; he was crouched on the ground with his knees tucked close to him. He felt a hand on his head and slowly started waking up; he knew he hadn't looked at Ivan —he felt too guilty to—so he just stared at the ground.

Till shot up on his bed, coming to a realization; while he was looking away from Ivan, he saw it: blood on the ground. What did this even mean? Did he get injured while running back, or was it something else? *Come on, Till! Think!* There has to be some sort of explanation. But what else was there? He never had the chance to acknowledge it, let alone ask him about it.

He pressed his palms into his eyes, as if he could physically push the memory away. The image of Ivan's blood flashed behind his eyelids every time he blinked. He had ignored it then, too consumed by guilt. Now, it was all he could see.

He turned around once more to check the time. *4:17 AM* . Wow, time sure does fly by when you're fantasizing about your crush. At this point he didn't care about sleep anymore; he just wanted to know why his bleeding that night was so important.

He tried not to make any noise as he got off from his bed and exited his room; the hallways were dark and empty, and the only sound that could be heard was that from the air conditioning, making this place a freezing hell for anyone without socks on, something Till had obviously remembered, right?

His feet met with the ice-cold floor, sending shivers down his spine, but he would have to push away the feeling and make his way toward Sua's room; if anyone was going to know something about Ivan, it was

going to be her. Besides, he needed answers, and he needed them now, and he wasn't so sure that he could face Ivan just yet.

He moved slowly through the hallways, making sure to not make any sound and get to the black-haired girl's room as quickly as possible. In the meantime, he tried to come up with a few theories of his own: fallen tooth, nosebleed, cut, scrape, broken bone? There really weren't that many possibilities for what it could be, but if it was going to peeve him this much, it had to be something serious.

Till was never the type to go to the library and just read some medical books; he didn't know much about wounds or illnesses. Nevertheless, he knew the answer was deep in his mind; there has to be some subconscious way he knows it's bad, right? Something like that?

Before he could even knock on her door, it opened and revealed a pale-looking Sua, eyes red and wide after landing on Till. "Till! I was just going to look for you!"

"Me? Why?"

"Look, have you noticed anything strange about Ivan lately? I mean, more than usual."

"Why do you think I'm here? I wanted to ask you something too."

"What is it?"

"I mean, it was a really long time ago, but do you remember ever seeing Ivan bleed? Okay, I know that sounds strange, but when we were little, did he ever, like, break a leg or something?"

"Huh?" She thought he already had a clue, but what is he even saying? Broken leg? Is he kidding?

"You know what, never mind; I know it's stupid." Till couldn't shake the feeling that he was still missing something, but only after saying it out loud did he realize how ridiculous he sounded.

"No, tell me." Her voice was stern, but he really didn't know what to say to make her understand.

"I just have this feeling."

" *Feeling* ?"

"Yeah, like something very bad happened to him years ago, but I just

can't remember what; I just remember seeing blood, but I really can't think of anything *that* horrible."

"Are you an idiot?"

"Why do you always say that!?

"Just think, Till, is there any wound or illness that would do something like that? Preferably one you know?"

Come on, what else is there? Burns, bites, tongue bite—

He froze in place, not because of the cold, but because he finally understood, and he was *scared* . His breath quickened, destroying any sense of quietness he once had. He was scared because he didn't want to believe it, because he finally grasped the gravity of the situation.

Ivan has hanahaki disease.

Looking back now it's so obvious: the way he disappeared and came back sickly pale, the song he was writing, his defensiveness when talking about the topic—wait, he got angry at Till for saying he would get the surgery. If he got that defensive, does that mean...

"Sua, he'll get the surgery, right? He won't kill himself just to love someone, right!? Tell me I'm right!"

He hadn't realized how desperate he was until the words escaped his mouth; he had to live, he *had* to; he couldn't leave him, not now, not ever.

"Please, Sua! Say yes!"

Her face averted his gaze; she knew how painful it would be to say these words. Nonetheless, she had to; it was the only way to save him.

"I'm sorry, Till."

He didn't feel the ground hit his knees as he fell, nor the tears that were enveloping his eyes; he only felt the tightening in his chest after coming to the realization that the person he loves will die, from a love disease nonetheless.

"Sua, who is it?"

"What?"

“The person he loves—who is it? Maybe we can convince them to love him back somehow?” As much as the possibility of Ivan loving someone else hurt him, if he had to live in pain to see him alive and fulfilled, he would, even if it meant they would never be together.

At those words Sua turned her head around; her eyes were wide open in surprise before changing into those of anger. She was shocked that Till could be this oblivious but even more shocked that she hadn’t realized it sooner.

“Are you kidding me!?”

“Uh, what? No? I don’t want him to fucking die!?”

“You’re such an idiot!”

“Hey! Who are you calling an idiot, idiot!?”

“How can you be so stupid!”

“What are you even talking about!”

They were screaming at each other, one in anger and the other in pure confusion. They didn’t really get along as well as with the others, but there had always been a mutual understanding that they both cared for their friends, and to Till it didn’t seem like Sua was taking this seriously, but oh how wrong he was.

“It’s you!”

…

What…?

He stood frozen in place, and his heart was beating so fast he felt it was going to come out of his chest. All this time, ever since that day, Ivan had loved *him* ?

“I’m honestly surprised you didn’t figure it out sooner. I mean, he did everything to get your attention; even your fights were because of that. He would always stare at you, and come on, the collar? Did you think he just went around taking it off of everyone or what? Till he literally tried to escape with you.”

Okay, wow, harsh much? He knew Ivan cared about him; he had a whole conversation about it with Mizi, and he knew he did too, but he never imagined it was that type. Well, now that he thinks about it,

Mizi did say, " *For once in your life, can't you open your eyes and see how Ivan feels about you!? How are you the only person who doesn't see it!?"* So maybe he needed harsh.

"Okay, okay, so let me get this straight. Ivan has been in love with me for years, even before our 'escape,' and on that day the hanahaki developed because he thought I didn't love him, and he's been living with it for years!? And you're telling me this just now!?"

"Why are you acting like I knew all along!? I only just found out about the hanahaki, like, yesterday; I was actually—

Sua's voice disappeared in the background as Till realized how long it's actually been since that day, how much time Ivan has spent suffering, alone, and all the times he might have gotten close to dying with no one beside him, and before he knows it, he's running, sprinting as fast as possible toward Ivan's room; he has to get to him before it's too late.

The night shines expectantly at Ivan as he does his usual routine; only now he doesn't bother looking in the mirror. He doesn't want to see what a mess he's made of himself; he doesn't want to see blood drying on his skin as fresh blood comes out of his mouth. It wasn't unusual for him to wake up in the middle of the night, but today he didn't even try to sleep; dreams can also hurt you, especially after today.

He looked down at the floor, or what used to be, blood and flowers littering the ground; and even though it was a sign he was nearing his end, he found the sight to be beautiful; it was the deepest declaration of love, a token of true devotion.

Even though he knew the end was near, he always made sure to clean up. No matter how many times he woke up with a migraine or blurry vision, his room was always spotless. He couldn't bear to see the sight of his real self, not for one second longer than he had to.

But blood would dirty every place he wiped clean; he would leave a trail of crimson everywhere he went. Always messing up stuff, huh? His hand would shake with the expectant feeling of agony. The feeling of his lungs emptying didn't fill him with relief but dread, as he realized these final flowers were the ones to deal the blow.

He wouldn't be able to go the way he wanted to; he wasn't even able to clean up after himself. Blood-stained paper hit the mirror with a *splat* , staining the image of the person looking at it. That is all he

would ever be.

If he had one wish, it would be to go back to that moment, the moment that marked his end. He regretted not pulling Till back and leaving, but now there was nothing he could do but hope.

He had always loved the stars, shining in the dark void of the night; they made something unimportant beautiful. Till was his shooting star, shining bright before leaving him.

Before his illness takes him, he wants one last thing: to see the stars once again with his love. It was impossible at this point, but Ivan had always been a dreamer. Just the mere thought was enough to give him the strength to stand up and keep walking; he would walk until he got what he wanted.

“Hey! Wait for me!”

Till can’t hear her anymore, the sound of his heartbeats numbing out everything else; he won’t even listen to his own thoughts, fearing they might be true.

As they both reach Ivan’s room, the first thing that they see is a trail of blood, occasionally adorned with red flower petals. The wall was also stained with red handprints from which Ivan had supported himself.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Where is he!?” He didn't bother hiding the desperation in his voice; all he cared about was making sure he got to the black-eyed boy in time.

“How should I know?? Look, you follow the trail, and I’ll go get Mizi.”

“What!? We have no time, Sua!”

“Don’t you get it!? He only needs to see *you* right now, Till. Go! Run!”

And so he did; he ran as fast as he could, for it was only a matter of time.

The sight in front of him filled him with both nostalgia and pain; he never thought he would ever come back. Nonetheless, here he was. What would the aliens think of him suddenly dying? He wished he

could see their faces when they found out their perfect pet was gone.

What about Mizi? Sua? Would they cry? Maybe they will never find out. Anakt wouldn't risk damaging their mental strength. But Sua would realize sooner or later what happened; she just wouldn't tell Mizi.

Till?

Oh, how he wished he was sitting next to him right now. Would that bring him pain or relief? Maybe both. But he wouldn't care; even if being with him was the most painful thing in the world, he would pick it a thousand times if he could. Love sure makes you crazy.

He was glad to have been given the opportunity to talk to Till for one last time; those few moments in which they were together were the highlight of his day, and now of his death.

Before he could close his eyes, he saw what appeared to be a person in the distance. He couldn't see them clearly, but one thing he could recognize was that spiky, grey hair, and his body instinctively sat up before being met with unmeasurable pain. He laid back down and did his best to keep his eyelids from falling.

"Ivan!"

He couldn't be happier as tears well up in his eyes and fall down his cheeks. Till is running to him, and for a second the bouquet forming inside him seemed to have disappeared, only for a second though.

When Till reached Ivan, the boy was already half-gone, his breaths shallow as petals clung to his lips. Till's hands shook as he cradled Ivan's face, his thumbs smearing blood instead of wiping tears.

"Ivan! Oh my god, I'm so glad you're alive. Please don't go."

Ivan's fingers twitched, curling weakly around Till's wrist. His voice was a frayed thread. "H… Help."

He tries to speak, but the flowers are stuck inside his throat, digging into him every time he moves even an inch.

Till doesn't know what to do; he's here, but now what? He had the boy he loved on top of his thighs, screaming in agony, and he had no idea how to help him.

If only for a second, he saw inside of Ivan's mouth what appeared to be flowers, and without a second thought, he grabbed his chin, opening his mouth.

"I'm sorry." Were the words he said as he pulled and pulled at them, trying to ignore the screams below him. He only just realized he was crying as his vision blurred for a second.

After a while he was finally able to get them out of his throat, throwing the bloodied flowers over to the side. He was finally able to look into Ivan's eyes as he was slowly recovering.

"I'm here now; everything is going to be okay."

He pulled him close in his chest, holding tight as if fearing the moment he let go he would be gone. Ivan held him even tighter, crying with relief that it was finally over. Till grabs Ivan's cheek softly, making him look at him.

"I love you, Ivan."

Ivan's heart skips a beat as he sits up, leveling with the boy in front of him. He was shocked—no, beyond that; it had never occurred to him that his feelings would ever be reciprocated.

"What?"

"I don't know how I didn't realize it sooner; I'm sorry. Everything's going to be okay; we'll be okay."

Ivan pulls Till in, caressing his cheek while looking straight into his eyes, his soul. They were made to be together.

Till's hands shake as he grabs Ivan's face—not gentle, but desperate, like he's trying to physically stop him from disappearing. Ivan's breath hitches when Till touches him, his usual control shattered. A tiny, broken sound escapes before he can stop it.

"Say it again," Ivan breathed against Till's lips.

Till swallowed. "I love you."

A pause. Then, so quiet it was almost lost: "...I know."

He traces his fingers over Till's lips, their hearts racing as they move closer. Ivan had wanted to do this for so long, and he was finally able to. Till's lips parted, expecting what was about to happen. He moves

his hand to the nape of Ivan's neck, finally closing the gaps between their mouths.

Till kisses him first—not to be sweet, but to shut him up, to prove he's real. Ivan melts into it, his usual smirk gone, replaced by something unbearably vulnerable. Till kissed him like it was a fight, like he could force the life back into Ivan's lungs. Ivan yielded instantly, his hands fisting in Till's shirt—not pushing, just holding on, as if Till alone could tether him to earth.

They had to separate to catch their breath, but after getting a taste of the feeling, being apart felt like starving.

"I love you, Till."

A kiss.

"I love you so much."

A peck.

They closed the distance once more, grabbing at each other with immense hunger, their mouths opening and closing to let the other in. The taste of blood lingers between them from the flowers Till ripped out, metallic and bitter, but neither pulls away.

Until they finally stopped, could Ivan see the tears falling from Till's eyes.

Till pressed their foreheads together. "You don't get to leave. Not after everything."

He kisses his forehead, and they both lie down on the ground, turning to look at each other. Their faces appeared with happiness, holding each other closer than ever.

Ivan's fingers found Till's, intertwining. "Then make me stay."

"You know, I have loved you ever since you defended Mizi from an alien that one time."

"You were watching?" They giggled as they thought back to those memories from so long ago.

"It's something I've always loved about you; you're rebellious, and you never cared about what they would do to you. You always defend the people you love, even if it's useless."

“It’s never useless.”

They looked into each other’s eyes, falling deeper in love every second that passed.

“Hey, Ivan?”

“Yeah?”

“Does this mean we can finally escape?”

He hadn’t realized it, but he was right; they were outside Anakt Garden now, and they didn’t have to go back.

“Yeah, and we’ll save everyone else too. Promise.”

They are older than they were the last time they were here, and after years of thinking back on that moment, they realized all that they could do differently this time. They were going to get help and finally get everyone out of that hellhole.

A shine of light quickly passed above them, and when they looked at the sky, they found a sight worth all their suffering. The light would flash as the shooting stars ran through the night.

Their hands held tight to each other, both of them admiring the scenery above them. Who knew when they would be able to see something like this again?

Ivan turns his head to look at Till only to find him staring back with an expression he could only describe as love.

“I love you.” He whispered.

“I love you too.” He never thought he would be able to say these words to him, and now they were here, finally together.

Ivan placed his left hand on his cheek as Till’s eyes slowly started to close, all the sleep he missed catching up to him. And they both relaxed in the embrace of the other. Finding peace within each other.

The sun shines brightly on their pale skin, making Till forcefully open his eyes. When he looks around, he sees something unexpected. Mizi and Sua are with them too; both of them are asleep, but it doesn’t look like they will be for long.

Both of the girls start slowly waking up, and upon seeing Till awake, they quickly go over to him and bombard him with questions.

“What happened?”

“Did everything go out okay?”

“Did you finally profess your deep, undying love to each other?”

Oh my god…

“Hey, hey, slow down. I can only answer one thing at a time.”

He rests back on the ground, lying next to Ivan. He looks so peaceful, as if he had never known pain; he almost looks innocent. Till hoped that he would never have to deal with anything like that ever again.

Thinking back to the night before, he laughs so loud that the girls get worried of someone finding them, but he doesn't care anymore. They’re finally free; they don’t have to be afraid ever again.

Mizi starts laughing too, and shortly after Sua joins them as well, but there’s someone missing. Till playfully kicks Ivan’s foot, wanting him to wake up, but he doesn’t. His foot falls limp, and only then does Till realize he’s more pale than usual, even with his sickness.

“Come on, man, wake up.”

He tries his best to keep his voice steady, but as the realization of what is happening hits him, he can’t calm down. He grabs his shoulders and slowly pulls him up, his body feeling heavier than usual.

“Ivan! Please wake up! Are you listening to me!?”

He starts shaking him, but there’s no response; his arms move back and forth so oddly he almost looks like a doll.

Mizi looks horrified, and Sua is on the verge of throwing up. None of them can keep their composure while seeing that one of their friends is now dead in front of them, and there’s nothing they can do about it.

As difficult as it is, Mizi moves toward Till, placing a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

“Till, stop it!”

He pushes her hand away, not daring to turn around and lose sight of the dark-haired boy in front of him.

Nothing can be heard but their cries, breaths uneven as the tears fall and sobs escape their mouths.

Till couldn't just believe that the person he was with just a few moments ago was dead; it was just yesterday when they had finally expressed how they felt. He couldn't leave now.

He doesn't realize what's happening as everything turns into a blur; he can hear shouts, but not what they're saying; he can feel his body being pulled away, but not by whom. He doesn't have enough time to think before his eyes close and his consciousness drifts away.

Before he opens his eyes, he can hear the mechanical sounds coming from machines—machines he happens to be attached to, feeling the uncomfortable needle wrapped around his arm.

He can hear people talking near him, but the words are a mess in his head, and the constant beeping of the heart monitor is driving him crazy.

"Hey, his… -beat is… -ing cra…"

What's going on?

He can hear people moving and pairs of hands being placed on him, and he feels trapped. He tries to stand, but he's being pushed onto the bed, and he can't move. His eyes are shut tight, and his legs are flailing around, doing everything possible to be free. But even his legs are being held down.

"Get off of me!"

He finally opens his eyes, only to be met with the faces of people he doesn't recognize in a room far different from what he's used to. They look almost scared? Or maybe angry? But he doesn't care; there's only one person that he wants to see.

"Where is he!?"

They look at each other, not knowing what to say. Suddenly someone comes into the room, and everyone turns to look at him. The first thing that stands out to Till is a scar over his left eye. He also has light

brown hair, and based on everyone's reactions to him arriving, he must be the leader.

"Where's Ivan!?"

He sits on the edge of the bed; his eyes are closed, but he can feel the pity in his look.

"You must be Till."

"I want to see him."

He looks down and sighs before speaking again.

"We're sorry, we did the best we could—"

Obviously they don't want to tell him anything, so Till stands up and yanks away anything attached to him; it hurts like hell, and he's most definitely bleeding, but he doesn't care; this pain is nothing compared to what Ivan has been through.

He shoves everyone out of the way and just starts running. He doesn't know anything about this place, how big it is, or even how many rooms there are, so it's going to be near impossible for him to find the right place, but as long as he's alive, he'll keep running.

Before he can even look up, he crashes into someone; they both fall, and as he tries to run away again, he is stopped by someone else. Mizi is helping Sua stand up while she's glaring at Till, but he doesn't care anymore.

"What are you doing!? You're bleeding; you need help!" She tries to grab his arm, but he pulls away.

"Where's Ivan?"

He won't even look at them; he's staring at the floor, and the tears just start coming out. He falls to his knees; he's tired, just so tired; the only thing he wants to do, he can't.

"He's gone."

"No! You're lying!"

"Till, please."

He's sobbing, but Sua doesn't seem to care anymore; she just wants to

leave. “Let’s go, Mizi; he needs more time.” She pauses before looking at him one last time. “You should probably get that checked out.”

As he’s watching them walk away, he realizes that maybe *they* know where he is. He starts following them, leaving a trail of blood dripping from his arms; they’re really starting to sting now.

They stop at a door, and he quickly hides. After they go in and close it, he walks up to it and tries listening in on the conversation.

“We just saw him.” That’s Sua.

“How did he look?”

“Not well. Are you sure about this?” Okay, that’s Mizi, but he doesn’t recognize everyone else.

“We did as many tests as possible… There’s no doubt about it.”

Are they talking about me?

“He needs the—”

He bursts in, demanding answers.

“What’s going on here!?”

All eyes were on him; he hated the look on their faces. They were all pitying him.

“Till, calm down—”

“Just tell me where he is!”

Then, the same guy from before approaches him; he already knows what he’s going to say and doesn’t want to hear any of it.

“He’s dead, Till. He’s not coming back.”

“He’s still alive! Stop lying!”

Without any other choice, he grabs Till firmly and pulls him away to another room. When they get there, he can just feel goosebumps creeping up his neck. It’s cold and dark, filled with many small doors on the walls. Even though he’s never been in this room, he knows what it’s for.

The scar guy goes over to one of the doors on the wall and opens it, revealing a body covered in a white sheet. He doesn't want to believe it; he *can't* believe it; it's not true.

The sheet was too white.

Jacob pulled the fabric back.

Ivan's face was waxen, his lips tinged blue. Not sleeping—too still for that. The kind of stillness that didn't belong to humans, but to mannequins, to dolls with glass eyes.

Till's knees hit the concrete. He didn't feel it.

"Wake up," he said.

Silence.

"Wake up!" He lurched forward, grabbing Ivan's shoulders—and recoiled. The body was cold, a cold that seared like fire. His fingers left bruises in the pale flesh, as if he could press color back into it.

A noise escaped him—not a sob, not a scream, but the sound of something ripping in half inside his chest.

Jacob tried to pull him away. Till fought, clawing at Ivan's shirt, the collar still crooked from their last fight. "You don't get to leave like this! You don't get to—"

Then he saw it.

A single petal, dried and blackened, clung to Ivan's lower lip.

Till's hands fell away.

He stays frozen; he doesn't know what to do, but the evidence is right in front of him. He can't deny it anymore, and as he slowly comes to that realization, he remembers all the signs he missed.

"It's all my fault; I knew something was wrong with him; I just didn't want to see it." He doesn't realize it, but his body is shaking, and he's started crying again. "If I had just realized it sooner, I could've stopped him." He turns to look at Ivan once more. "Y—you promised…" He chokes on his own words, overcome with emotion. Slowly, everyone else starts walking into the room too.

Most of them look away; some of them step out again. They don't

know what to do in a situation like this.

One girl starts approaching Till; he doesn't know who she is, but he remembers seeing her when he woke up. Her tan figure blocks Till's view as she's pulling him away from Ivan… Ivan's body.

"Hey, it's okay, it's okay. I understand how you feel, and I know it's hard, and I'm not going to tell you it gets better, but you shouldn't beat yourself up like this; you know deep down that this isn't your fault.

Till starts calming down, but he's still pretty shaken up. "How can you say you 'understand how I feel'? You know nothing about me."

"I didn't really want to say this, but it's not like he told you what was happening, right?"

Oh, now she's done it. Who does she think she is?

"You didn't literally give him the disease, did you? Love is a wonderful thing that got turned cruel in this situation; if Ivan had talked to you, you both would have realized—"

"Shut up! You know nothing about me—about him! So save your comments for someone else; I'm done listening to this."

He looks at her, and she has this compassionate smile that could make anyone feel better by just looking at it—everyone except him, that is. Everyone is staring at them, silence filling up the room as he starts calming down.

He tries to speak but is unable to, the knot in his throat tightening with every breath he takes. He has to take a moment to ground himself and really take in the situation. He never thought he would lose him so quickly.

"Can I just be left alone!?"

No one bothers answering him as they all start pouring out, one by one; the last ones to leave are Mizi and Sua, but he can't be bothered to notice a detail like that when Ivan is right in front of him, lifeless.

The door closes behind them, and Till is finally back with Ivan, just like he wanted, right?

In the stillness of the room he can hear his shaky breaths, hoping that

maybe some of them are coming from someone else. The air reeked of antiseptic and something sweetly rotten beneath—like flowers left to wilt in stagnant water. He stands frozen in place; he feels his heart beat beneath him, and it takes everything in him to not rip it out and offer it up. To switch places.

The tears come flooding out as he gets closer. “You lied… You said we would escape together.”

Ivan's wrist bent too easily when Till grabbed it, the joint lax in death in a way it never was in life. He places his hand on his cheek, the cold almost pushing him away. His thumb grazes his lip as he wipes away the dried flower petal. His lips have lost their softness, now replaced with harsh, dry dead skin. He doesn’t mind it, though.

He moves his face closer, hair falling down onto his face. Slowly, teardrops fall onto Ivan’s skin, and Till wishes for him to wipe them away, but he won’t—he can’t. His hands are holding his head, refusing to let go. He doesn’t think at all about what he’s doing as he feels their lips touch one last time, softly, just a little peck before they part ways. The kiss tasted like copper and dust. Till pretended not to notice how Ivan's lips didn't soften under his, how no breath warmed the space between them. What was once a hungry desire for one another has turned into a longing love for something impossible.

He separates himself from him. He strokes his hair, placing it behind his ear. A single drop of moisture trailed from Ivan's eye—not a tear, just the body's final surrender to gravity. As his fingers leave him, a warmness returns to them, only more proof of what he’s never getting back.

His footsteps feel loud in contrast to the silent room. He’s walking back out and feels the door get farther and farther away; no matter how fast he goes, he can’t seem to escape, but maybe he doesn’t even want to. He could just stay here, with Ivan.

He feels his mind slip away when someone opens the door. He’s back on the ground, hugging his knees. He only moves his eyes to look at the person; he doesn’t know why they’re here, nor does he care.

“Tell them I want him to have a funeral.”

The door is held open as the person stays standing there, the light entering from outside being littered by their shadow.

“Okay.”

People can be heard running around, moving things from one place to another, but Till is still stuck in that room, and no one is letting him help. Everything is so loud but silent at the same time. He's been staring at the ceiling ever since he woke up; he's trying to put his thoughts together, but there are so many to even count.

Mizi had told him that the guy from yesterday was Jacob, and he is, in fact, the leader of this "organization"; apparently they're a human rebellion against the aliens. The woman who was trying to help him was called Hyuna; like them, she was also rescued and brought here. Apparently she has a fake leg, but he hasn't seen it yet.

Hyuna had come by earlier to speak to him; she was keeping him up to speed on everything that they were doing, and before leaving, she asked him if he wanted to say some words during the funeral. "Something about who he was," she said.

He picks up the pen and paper she left for him and stares at the empty white sheet in front of him. His hand shakes as he tries to write something, anything, but the words come out illegible. Blobs of ink start smudging as tears drop from his eyes. He doesn't know how to live without him anymore.

The door opens, and Mizi and Sua enter the room. "Everything's ready; we're just waiting for you." They are both wearing black dresses and matching gloves. They leave a black suit on the chair in front of him and leave the room. It doesn't seem like they want to be in that same room as him for long.

He puts it on, and it actually fits; he looks at himself through the mirror and only now realizes how awful he looks. His skin is pale, and his hair is a mess; he tries his best to comb it with his fingers, but some strands keep sticking out. If he didn't know any better, he might think he was getting married.

Funny.

He steps out and sees that the girls were waiting for him; since he doesn't know the layout of this place, they guide him along the way. None of them had to say anything; each of them focused on different things to not think about where they were going.

They stop in front of a door that's at the end of a dark hall. He clutches the paper inside his pants pocket and braces himself for what he has to do now.

Sua opens the door, and Till is surprised by how big it really is inside; *isn't this place supposed to be like a shelter or something?* There are rows of chairs filled with people he's never met. At the end he sees a wooden casket with a podium next to it; Hyuna is on one side next to two other guys, and on the other side is Jacob.

Mizi and Sua step in front of him and start walking; he does too. The hall is longer than he thought; heads turn to look at them as they go further down, and he tries his best to ignore them. They stand next to Jacob as he starts to give a speech; he doesn't care to listen to it though. None of them even knew Ivan; what could they possibly say about him?

The casket was too small. Till kept thinking he hated confined spaces —but the rebellion had no resources for anything grander.

He stopped talking at some point, and right now everyone is staring at Till. Was he supposed to go up too? Right now? He walks up to the now empty podium and takes the paper out of his pocket; he opens it up, but it's empty. He already knew this and still took it out. Now what is he going to say?

"Um…" He starts talking but trails off; the tons of adjectives to describe Ivan in his mind still felt like too little to him.

He looks over to Mizi, then to Sua; they're both looking at him, concerned. He's really going to make a fool out of himself, isn't he?

His voice cracked. "Ivan was… stubborn. And angry. And he loved music more than anything." He recalled the song he never got to finish; he had hoped that maybe one day Ivan could sing it, but not anymore. "He deserved better."

He didn't know they weren't concerned about his speech but about him. He hadn't realized it yet, but he was sweating—a lot. His skin had somehow gotten paler, and his hands were shaking.

He scratched his head, trying to come up with anything, just anything more to say, but every time he thought about Ivan, his chest tightened and his throat closed up.

He opened his mouth to start speaking again, but Till's knees buckled mid-sentence. He caught himself on the casket's edge, fingers scraping wood, and he tried his best to breathe again. The crowd murmured as Mizi rushed forward, but Till was already clawing at his own throat, as if he could rip it open and let air in.

Quickly, he used his hand to close his mouth; he felt like he was going to throw up. He swiftly gets off the podium and starts running toward the door. He only made it a few steps out before collapsing onto the ground and vomiting.

It feels horrible, but he spits and coughs until there's nothing else to come out. His eyes are closed, but he hears people running out for him before they stop dead in their tracks.

"Till, are you okay?"

Mizi is the first to speak up, but he can't even respond. His throat is burning, and he fears that opening his mouth again would mean another wave coming out. He calms down and swallows, only to start coughing again; this time everyone rushes over to help him.

"Hey, it's okay; don't push yourself."

He pushes everyone off of him and stands up. He hadn't had the opportunity to look at the mess he made—not that he wanted to, anyway—and when he finally does, his world goes still. It's not possible, is it? It doesn't make any sense. It's gotta be a sick prank, right?

Before him was a flower bud, sitting still on a pool of blood. His blood.

Uneven breaths fill the air as he starts hyperventilating; he doesn't want to believe it, because it's not true.

"Till…" Hyuna starts speaking but can't find the right words.

She gets interrupted by him, the petals surge up his throat, and he barely takes a breath before puking again, blood and blossoms splattering the concrete. Mizi screamed. Sua cursed. And Jacob just looked resigned.

"We ran tests on all of you when you got here." Jacob steps in. "Unfortunately, as you can see, you also have Hanahaki disease."

What?

"We wanted to do the surgery, but your friends told us to leave it up to you."

Hold on.

Hyuna stepped forward. “We can save you. But you have to choose.”

Slow down.

“I mean, we know it’s a tough decision, but it’s the best alternative.”

This isn’t happening.

“We want this to be your choice, but please think about it.”

A surgery? But what about Ivan?

Mizi’s grip on his arm tightened. “Till, please. Don’t make us lose you too.”

It all happened in a matter of seconds; he still hadn’t wrapped his head around the concept when he found himself back in his room. This is all too much for him; first, Ivan dies because of fucking flowers, and now, he’s going to die too? By the same thing? He has to be dreaming.

He thinks back to that fight he had with Ivan; he was so naive back then. He really didn’t know anything, did he? Ivan was right, though; there’s no way he’s going to take a risk so big. He has more time, right? Ivan managed to live for years with his disease, so maybe he doesn’t have to choose right now.

He looks around the room, the brown walls being a stark contrast to the white of Anakt. Everything was going to be different from now on; he was part of a rebellion now, and there were more people to think about than himself. This is what he wanted, what they wanted. To be able to save everyone and live freely.

At least he hoped so.

Till’s room was too quiet.

The rebellion’s medics had given him sedatives, but they’d worn off hours ago, leaving him stranded in the dark. The air smelled sterile, like antiseptic and old bandages—nothing like Ivan, who always carried the scent of ink and something faintly metallic, like the strings of a guitar left out in the rain.

He rolled onto his side, facing the wall. Maybe if he didn’t look at the empty space beside him, he could pretend Ivan was just late. Again.

Then—a breath. Not his own.

Till went rigid.

“You’re staring,” murmured a voice from behind him.

His heart stopped.

Slowly, he turned.

Ivan sat cross-legged at the foot of the bed, chin propped on his palm. Moonlight cut through him like he was made of glass, glinting off the curve of his fang. He looked amused. “What? Not even a ‘hello’?”

Till’s lungs seized. He reached out—his fingers passed through Ivan’s wrist like smoke.

Ivan laughed, the sound fraying at the edges. “Yeah. That’s gonna keep happening.”

Till’s voice was a wreck. “You’re not real.”

Ivan tilted his head, black eyes reflecting nothing. “Depends. Are you?”

A cough tore through Till’s chest. He doubled over, petals spilling onto the sheets—red, like the ones that had choked Ivan. When he looked up, the bed was empty.

Only the scent of ink remained.

A loud sound startles him; he looks around, not knowing what to hope, and sees Hyuna enter through the door once more; he quickly hides the mess he made. “They found this in one of your pockets. I thought that maybe it was important.” He looks down at what she’s holding and recognizes the paper instantly. It’s the song he was writing about Ivan.

Terrible timing.

“Also, here’s your food for today.”

“Thank you.” He murmurs. She can barely hear him.

“No problem.”

She starts heading out, but Till stops her. “Wait. Can I ask you

something?"

"Sure, what's up?"

"What do you think I should do?"

She stays silent for a moment, contemplating her answers. "I don't know; it's not really my decision to make. But if it were me, I would have the surgery. I know there's the risk of forgetting that person, but it's not guaranteed. Even so, your case is different."

"What do you mean different?"

"Well, since the person you love is… dead, they can't reciprocate your feelings anymore. You might not have as much time as you think."

Till laughed, raw and broken. "Yeah. Funny, isn't it? I told him to get the surgery. Now he's dead, and I'm—" A cough wracked his body, a single bud landing in his palm.

"I'm sorry…" And with that, she leaves Till by himself.

He remembers all the times he spent with Ivan and can't help the tears from forming in his eyes. He misses the times he got caught staring at him, even when they would fight. He didn't appreciate him enough, and now he's gone.

Why couldn't he have just run away with him when they were kids? Everything would have been better. Maybe they could have been taken in by the rebellion, just like Hyuna. They would have come back for everyone.

But that's in the past, and there's nothing that can change it. Ivan is no longer alive, and Till will soon be as well. Maybe in another life things could have been different.

He doesn't know how much time has passed since they first got here; days have started blending together. It's silent outside; everyone is probably asleep already.

He closes his eyes and tries his best to not think about the pair of eyes watching him in silence.

Cold sweat trickles down his forehead while he's lying down. He tries his best to sleep, but his body wants to punish him, to make him feel everything Ivan went through because of him.

He swallows, but it only makes it worse, the dryness of his throat repelling the moisture of his saliva, sending a burning ache through his body. Even after all the sleepless nights, each the same as the next, he still can't get used to the pain and the disgusting sensation of the flowers moving inside him.

He wonders how Ivan dealt with this for years without telling anyone; he just wouldn't open up, would he? Maybe he could do everyone a favor and run away; they shouldn't be worrying about him for so long. He can't even offer anything back to them.

"I have a better idea~"

He's just wasting resources; there's no point in him being such a burden to them; he doesn't even know whether he'll get the surgery or not.

"Don't you want to see me again, Till?"

Till didn't startle at the voice anymore. Ivan lounged on the medical cot, legs swinging idly like this was just another lazy afternoon in the garden. The moonlight cut right through him, making his edges glow faintly blue.

"Of course I do; you know I do."

Ivan starts moving closer to him, sitting on the edge of the bed; he moves his hand closer to him and gently wraps it with his. It's cold, but he likes the coldness now; it's a reminder of what they shared.

"Why don't you come with me?" His grip on his hands gets tighter.

"What do you mean—"

He tries to speak, but the words are buried beneath a bed of flower petals, heavy as they multiply, crushing him from the inside. He feels the water in his eyes before the pain in his chest as it slowly moves up towards his throat. He tries scratching, but that only makes it worse as the petals start choking him, forcing his mouth open as they cascade down onto the bed; the white sheet gets stained with drops of crimson blood, and Till can feel his body shaking as a pair of hands grabs him by the arms, shaking him dizzy.

He can't focus on them right now, his vision paralyzed, staring at what had begun forming inside of him. The petals glistened in Till's palm like wet rubies. They almost looked beautiful like this. The red color

of the petals causes him such rage, recalling how these are the very same ones he saw coming out of Ivan. He looks for something, anything, to make them disappear, and that's when he sees it: a lighter.

Someone must have left it here by accident when visiting him. But this was just what he needed.

He quickly snatches it and holds his arm to prevent it from shaking as he hovers it in front of him; he makes sure it's working and admires the flame before it quickly disappears. *Hurry up and get it done already* . Placing a single petal between his fingers, he holds it over the lighter and ignites it.

A hand grabs the petal from his fingers.

"Why fight it? These are mine. You've always been mine."

He looks up and is met with a cold stare that sends shivers down his spine; it only lasts a second before he returns to his usual gleeful demeanor. He looks at the petal in his hand, thinking it is going to be burned, only to see it perfectly intact; there's no trace of the fire anywhere.

"You should be careful; these things are dangerous."

He takes the lighter from Till and throws it far away into a corner of the room; he knows he won't pick it up.

He sighs as he stands up from the bed and takes the petals into his arms; they're dyeing his clothes and skin red, but after having done this many times before, it's become less of an inconvenience to him.

The room smelt of metal now; the bloodied petals had accumulated in the trash bag they had left for him to throw them in.

"Why do you keep throwing them away?"

"Why do you care?"

"It's the only thing left of me now."

The audacity.

After throwing another batch of petals, he goes to the bathroom to change and clean himself. Ivan quickly follows after him.

“What? Not gonna answer?”

“I’m not in the mood.”

“You never are.”

“And whose fault is that?”

He closes the door behind him as he gets out, hoping to keep him there, but it doesn't work, of course; Ivan isn't real, after all.

“Why can't you just leave me alone?”

At that, Ivan scoffs. “ *You're* still holding on to me. *You* won't let me go.”

Silence.

“You know that ignoring me won’t make me go away, right?”

Till sighs, “Yeah, I know.”

They have been going back and forth like this ever since he first showed up; even Till can’t believe he’s gone mad and started hallucinating Ivan. He sometimes forgets there’s no one else in the room with him.

“So, what are you going to do?”

“About?”

“Your disease.”

“What are you, my therapist?”

“You tell me.”

Till sighs; he’s definitely gone crazy, but at the same time, there’s no one else that would understand the situation he’s in, and he hasn’t really talked to anyone else.

“It's just…” After all the time he’s tried to hold himself together, he can’t seem to close the cap on the bottle he stuffed his emotions in. “There are so many things going on. First, you die, then I wake up in a random place surrounded by people I don't know, *then* I find out I have hanahaki as well, and now you’re here.”

He somehow manages to say everything without stuttering, and he realizes as he takes a deep breath that he's been crying. "You never make sense; you're always changing how you act, and it's driving me crazy." He wipes the tears that soaked his cheeks and the snot coming out of his nose with his sleeve.

"Till, you…" Ivan stops himself. "Never mind."

"No, what were you gonna say?"

"Well… You do know that forgetting you wasn't the only reason I didn't get the surgery, right?"

Till can't stand the look on his face; he was supposed to be the only person to not pity him, to not feel sorry for him.

"What do you mean?"

"If anyone found out that something was wrong with me… that I was… defective, they would have gotten rid of me."

"Oh…"

"But you don't have to worry about that; they have no control over you anymore."

He had never thought about that; he always defaulted to the fight they had and what Ivan had said, how he wouldn't risk forgetting, but it's obvious; they were training them to be perfect, so something like this would definitely not have meant good news for him.

"You're right."

"So? What are you thinking?"

He gets woken up by Mizi bringing breakfast again; she claims everyone else is too busy, but they probably don't want to see a near-dead person. It's been like this for what feels like months now. He thanks her, but she doesn't leave.

"So… Any progress?"

He really didn't want to be asked again, but there's no avoiding it; everyone is waiting for him to pick "the right option," but they wouldn't be able to either if it were up to them.

“Actually… I’m thinking of going for it.”

“Really?” Her eyes lit up; he hasn’t seen her this happy in a while. “Don’t you dare lie to me! Are you really going to do it?”

“Yeah, I think I am.”

It used to be a daily fight with them; she would always push for him to get the surgery, and he would push back. Now, they have come to an understanding, and even if she will never know how it feels, he might live to tell her.

Mizi jumped on him, hugging him tightly. “I’m so happy! You’re doing the right thing, Till. Don’t worry about forgetting him; you know we’ll be there to make you remember, no matter what!”

She gets off of him and starts rambling to herself. “Oh! I have to tell Hyuna so that we can get everything ready. They’ll be so relieved.”

“Well then, I’m gonna go tell them; you just stay here, okay?” And before he can respond, she’s already running out the door.

“O… kay…”

When Mizi told them the news, everyone exhaled a sigh of relief; they had been worrying non-stop about what he would do, and it had started to take a toll on them. They quickly got everything ready and sent someone to go for Till.

“Let’s go.”

He took one last look at the room; the memories of the blood he lost and the flowers he created would stay here forever.

They both go out, and he follows the person to—what they called—the operation room. Its similarity with Anakt Garden was uncanny; if he didn’t know any better, he might’ve thought he was back there.

He laid down on the bed as they put something over his mouth and nose and told him to breathe.

“Count backwards from 10.”

With the little strength he has, he manages to dart his gaze upwards, only for it to fall on an empty space in the corner of the room; or at least he wanted it to, but there he was, as if nothing had happened.

The last thing he saw before the anesthesia dragged him under was Ivan's smile—real or imagined, he didn't know.

Waking up was agony. His chest burned, his lungs too light—hollowed out—as if the flowers had taken pieces of him when they left. He tries to sit up, but as he does, he feels as if his chest is being ripped apart. Till gasped, expecting petals, but the air flowed clean and cruel.

Hands grab him and push him down gently. "You need to rest." Someone tells him.

Blinking against the light, Till found them all staring—Mizi clutching his wrist like she was counting his pulse, Sua glaring at the heart monitor instead of him, Hyuna's arms crossed so tight her nails left half-moons in her skin.

"How do you feel?"

He takes a moment to breathe, feeling the air enter and leave his lungs without any obstructions. He had forgotten what it was like. He touched his throat. No blood. No roots. Just the ghost of fingers brushing his jawline in memory. "I'm okay," he lied. "Just tired."

They all sat in silence, too afraid to ask the question lingering on the top of their heads, to hear something they didn't want to. Mizi and Sua looked at each other, intertwining their hands together and holding tight; they hoped the worst-case scenario hadn't happened.

Hyuna stepped up next to him. Just how many people came to see him? "Do you remember Ivan?"

Ivan.

"That's why you didn't want to do it, right? Because you didn't want to forget him?"

"Well, did you?" It was Sua's turn.

"Well—"

"Please tell us you do!" Mizi stood up and clasped his hands in hers; he wasn't sure if it was to comfort him or her.

He looks in the corner again, not seeing the ghost that had been haunting him all this time. Till closed his eyes. A face flickered in the dark—sharp fang sharper smiles.

Till's laugh started as a wheeze, then shattered into something jagged. It tore at his stitches, but he couldn't stop. Mizi's grip turned painful. "He'd—" gasp "—hate this," he managed. "Me, bedridden? He'd never let me—"

"Till?" Sua's voice was razor-thin.

He pressed a hand to his bandaged chest—the surgery scar a map of Ivan's absence. "Yeah," he whispered. "I remember."

He had been selfish, and he knew that, but it was difficult for him to let go of the only thing linking them together. The words they spoke to each other would remain in that night forever, and he wouldn't be able to say them ever again.

His smile is so wide it's starting to make his cheeks hurt. Mizi tackled him in a hug that knocked the breath from his healed lungs. He didn't mind.

"I'm so… glad."

"Ah! Hey, be careful."

"Sorry."

But she's smiling; they all are, and he realizes then that this is the first time the three of them have been like this since they arrived here. He decides then and there to stop being a burden; he wants to help out other humans as much as they do, and it's about time that he starts showing it.

Hyuna's boot tapped the floor—her prosthetic, Till realized. The one she'd gotten after her own loss. "Good," she said. "Now get some rest. We have work to do."

Chapter End Notes

> I never expected for it to trun out as long as it did but I'm glad. I hope you liked the story and thank you so so much to everyone for reading (and keeping up with my update schedule), I love every single one of you guys!! <3

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